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The Norwegian champions, Bodo/Glimt, also make an appearance in our Champions League preview, alongside the 35 other teams to have qualified for the league phase of the 2025-26 competition.

Finally, if you'll forgive a bit of self-indulgence, we've marked *World Soccer's* 65th anniversary by diving into the archives and picking out some of our favourite front covers from down the years. Here's to the next 65.

**Jamie Evans, Managing Editor**

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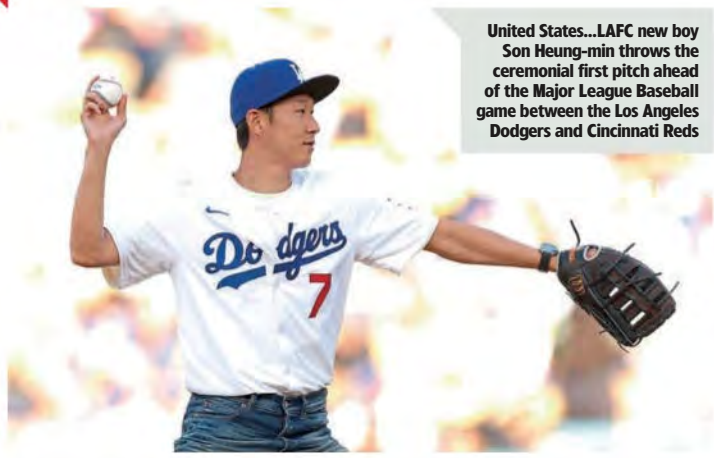


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Henry WINTER
THE VOICE OF FOOTBALL

# England v Wales, Lions v Dragons, Tuchel v Bellamy

England v Wales... Declan Rice and Aaron Ramsey could meet again in October's friendly

When England were humiliated by Iceland at Euro 2016, the players' pain was deepened on seeing a viral video of Wales players celebrating their loss. They felt it disrespectful. The Welsh were certainly daft to let footage filmed by a player somehow escape on to social media. England didn't forget and took their anger into the World Cup group game against the Welsh at the 2022 World Cup. Speaking to Luke Shaw before the match, we were left in no doubt how motivated England were. They duly thrashed Wales 3-0.

In October, England play Wales for the first time since Qatar and the game is ambitiously billed as a friendly. It can't be. There's too much rivalry, too much water under the Severn Bridge. England should have taken Welsh mocking as a compliment, a reminder they are still stirred by history and a desire to undermine opponents too often perceived as overlords.

Even the England press team has felt the Dragons fire. Back in the noughties, we were playing a fund-raiser at Ninian Park for a local hospice. The Welsh press team were determined to win and packed their side with those with loose media connections like Ian Rush, Mark Hughes, Neville Southall and Micky Thomas. To deal a knockout blow to our flickering chances Wales even had the heavyweight Joe Calzaghe in their corner – and at their corners. There wasn't a rush to mark him.

It's natural competition between neighbours. It's why England fans cheered Patrick Kluivert's goal for the Netherlands against their own side at Wembley at Euro '96; it meant the Dutch stayed in the tournament and Scotland were out. It's why my respect for the Scottish tennis champion, Andy Murray, grew when he said he would support whoever England's opposition were. It showed that Murray was a real fan of Scotland, and football, and was guided by tribalism.

So the England-Wales friendly should be intense, probably physical. The fans will demand that. Whether the managers do is another matter. Craig Bellamy's side face Belgium in Cardiff four days later in a World Cup qualifier that could help decide the group. The following evening, Thomas Tuchel's Three Lions side take on Latvia in Riga where victory seals qualification with two games to spare. They won't want any injuries.

The build-up will doubtless be

framed as more associated with Bellamy, such a fiery competitor during the Welshman's playing days, than Tuchel, who sees a tactical test not a cross-border skirmish. Yet Bellamy proves far more thoughtful and measured a manager than many anticipated. He's always analysed the game. I did interviews with him during his playing career, especially during controversial periods at Liverpool and Newcastle, and there'd be an interesting half-hour on the record and then a fascinating half-hour with the tape off when he'd elaborate on the strengths and weaknesses of his and other teams. Of course, Bellamy will tap into the rivalry to ensure his team are properly motivated, and the travelling 5,000+ Wales fans at Wembley will expect nothing less. But there will be a considered game plan.

**England v Wales is ambitiously billed as a friendly. It can't be. There's too much rivalry, too much water under the Severn Bridge**

As too the home side. Tuchel has found a 4-2-3-1 system that suits England, fielded players in their best positions and was rewarded with a mood-changing 5-0 win over Serbia in Belgrade in September when they finally added up to the sum of their substantial parts. Tuchel ignored previous criticism that followed England's drab 2-0 victory over Andorra. I saw him back-stage at Villa Park and he looked totally relaxed, clicking his fingers to an imaginary song as he strode down a corridor. Tuchel is supremely self-confident, doing things his way, and totally ignoring media campaigns. He picked Jordan Henderson for off-field, leadership reasons, much to public and press consternation.

Tuchel doesn't board bandwagons. He only starts them. There was some surprise when he picked and started winger Noni Madueke, whose pacy, penetrative running down the right against Serbia fully vindicated the decision. The season began with plenty of negativity around Madueke. Some Arsenal fans even had a petition to try to stop their club buying him from Chelsea. Madueke showed his high-grade ability in Belgrade.

Tuchel is tackling England's long-standing issues at holding midfield, left-back and left wing. He gave Elliot Anderson his chance anchoring midfield, allowing Declan Rice to express himself in a box-to-box role. That's worked. Myles Lewis-Skelly and Tino Livramento have impressed at left-back. Djed Spence has been given a surprise chance there. Tuchel has his favourites, and Marcus Rashford's presence has surprised many. But Tuchel knows that Rashford can bring fierce acceleration to left wing. He's also finding that Rashford may be most successful from the bench. Left wing remains an issue for Tuchel unless he switches Madueke when Arsenal team-mate Bukayo Saka returns from injury.

The September internationals revealed that Tuchel, very much his own man, will suggest one thing in public and then do another. He insisted England would go more long-ball and long-throw against Serbia, conjuring up headlines of long-ago English football. Were putting it in the mixer, running the channels and flick-ons really back in fashion? No. England sensibly mixed up direct attacks, set-pieces and the sort of flowing moves that brought three of the goals in Belgrade. Marc Guehi built from the back, Anderson dropped back to help moves. England played good football.

Tuchel still has the Jude Bellingham issue to address. He used Eberechi Eze as a No.10 against Andorra but the Arsenal new boy was disappointingly hesitant. Morgan Rogers was far more effective against Serbia. Tuchel has Cole Palmer too, while Bellingham is widely considered one of the best players in the world. When Bellingham returns from his shoulder rehab, the Real Madrid star knows there is strong competition for places and Tuchel is not swayed by reputation – nor by any of the British hysteria about history.

## Premier League spending demands prizes

Taking into account substantial return from sales, England's six Champions League representatives still saw a net outlay of £831m between them in the summer transfer window. Chelsea, such efficient traders, were actually in profit but the likes of Arsenal (£244m) and Liverpool (£229m) went big. The bookmakers are so confident of a Premier League club winning the trophy with the big ears that they offered only evens on an English triumph in the Budapest final as the competition opened.

It would be embarrassing for the Premier League if one of the cavalry charge didn't win. They have strong squads and excellent coaches. Liverpool under Arne Slot look the best equipped to go furthest, especially with so many options in attack. *Schadenfreude* would flow like the Danube through the continent if the Premier League faltered. Barcelona and Paris Saint-Germain are perceived to pose the biggest threat to the Premier League. Few outside the Bernabeu are giving Real Madrid much chance but they have the coach, the players, the pedigree and the emotional lure of a final in the Puskas Arena. What odds a third Real-Liverpool final in nine seasons?

**Big spenders ...Alexander Isak was one of many big Premier League summer signings**

## Communication failure cost Levy

Daniel Levy's sudden departure as executive chairman of Tottenham Hotspur in early September brought widespread reflections on his undeniable legacy of what is pound for pound, brick for brick, seat for seat the best stadium in the country. Levy also built a sixth-form college attached to the stadium that prepares local kids from disadvantaged backgrounds for Oxbridge entrance. He did a lot right. But Levy's failure to engage fully with fans was as ultimately costly for him as a poor record of two trophies in his 24 years in charge. Fans simply want reassurances that their club is in the right hands. So talk to them, explain your aims. Levy didn't enough.

# Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

## The man behind the stadium

***These days, the name Santiago Bernabeu brings to mind Real Madrid's stadium rather than the man it is named after***

Estadio Santiago Bernabeu is world famous as the home of Real Madrid. Yet, as it exerts its magnetising effect on another Champions League campaign, no one, it seems, stops to ask: who was this man and what was his significance?

The tale starts 130 years ago in the old town of Almansa, inland from Valencia to the northeast and Alicante to the southeast. That was the home of young Santiago, born on June 8, 1895, the youngest of seven children of a local lawyer and estates manager.

Both parents died young, and the teenage Bernabeu was taken to the capital and enrolled in the then Madrid FC by elder brothers Marcelo and Antonio in 1912. What he lacked in skill he made up for with enthusiasm, energy and the leadership qualities that soon secured the captaincy.

His one regret was that he never played for Spain despite several call-ups. Once, to his enduring bitterness, he was warming up on the pitch when the managers called him to the sidelines and replaced him. He blamed a Catalan/Basque cabal who ran the team. The antagonism would last a lifetime.

Bernabeu's ambition lay in medicine but his father insisted that only law guaranteed a secure future. Bernabeu obeyed, reluctantly, while not only playing for Madrid but rising to secretary and occasional coach. In 1927, he led the club's first overseas tour, to the Americas.

Nine more years saw Spain ripped apart by civil war. Bernabeu, with little sympathy for the Republic, fled to the safety of the French embassy and left for France. He returned later to join Francisco Franco's nationalists, a decision he would later admit regretting. His service in a battalion that took Barcelona was one reason for subsequent jibes at Madrid as "Franco's team."

**Club president... Santiago Bernabeu (R) oversees Luis del Sol signing his exit from Real Madrid to join Juventus in 1962**

Back in the capital, Bernabeu found his old club in ruins – no offices, their Chamartin stadium a wreck. Rebuilding was slow and painful. Bernabeu helped out. Then came a historic turning point.

War-fuelled animosity between Madrid and Barcelona exploded on the pitch in dramatic fashion in June 1943 in a semi-final of the re-designated Copa del Generalisimo. Barcelona won 3-0 in a seething Les Corts but met unremitting hostility back in the capital, including direct threats to players who had fled the war. Madrid won 11-1. The federation fined both clubs, so both presidents quit in joint protest.

Madrid, in an era before membership elections, appointed Bernabeu as provisional president. He told his new wife, Maria: "Don't worry, it's only for a year." By the time of his death in 1978, that year had stretched to 35.

Bernabeu's wife was the widow of a fellow Madrid officer killed during the civil war. They had no children. For Bernabeu, the players were his sons – but sons of a demanding "parent". Loyalty to the cause was the price, along with personal discipline, particularly in the restrictive early years under Franco. No long hair, no moustaches or beards, no private cars.

His Club – he always insisted on a capital C – discovered it had turned, by accident, to a man of extraordinary vision. Bernabeu reckoned fans in drab, war-battered Madrid would buy fund-raising bonds for a vast new stadium in which to cheer their heroes. He was right. On December 14, 1947, Madrid opened their Nuevo Estadio de Chamartin with its 70,000 capacity.

Successive expansions took the capacity up to 125,000. The latest, most spectacular remodelling caters for a seated 84,000 with all today's essential and fashionable facilities.

Taunts initially derided Bernabeu's dream stadium as a disastrous, loss-making white elephant. The league was dominated by air force-backed neighbours Atletico Aviacion – "they were the team of the regime, not us," insisted Bernabeu – and then Barcelona with their great Slovak-Hungarian centre-forward Laszlo Kubala.

The first nine years of Bernabeu's presidency brought just two domestic cup successes, in 1946 and 1947. Then, in 1952, to celebrate the club's 50th anniversary, he organised a mini-tournament featuring Swedish champions Norrkoping and Millonarios of Bogota.

FIFA's so-called "Pact of Lima" had shut down the infamous Colombian pirate league, so Millonarios were cashing in on their notoriety with a sunset series of lucrative friendlies. Bernabeu was captivated by Millonarios' all-action Argentinian centre-forward, Alfredo Di Stefano. Bernabeu recognised in Di Stefano the footballer he would have wanted to be – one moment clearing the ball out of his own penalty area, the next setting up attacks and finally scoring winning goals.

Here, for Bernabeu, was the man to fill his stadium, fulfil his ambitions and make his Real Madrid dreams come true. More than a year was needed to outsmart Barcelona financially and politically and bring Di Stefano to Chamartin. Bernabeu finally saw Di Stefano make a hastily arranged debut in a friendly against Nancy. Madrid won 4-2 – then went on to conquer Spain, Europe and the world.

Bernabeu and Di Stefano were men from a similar mould – self-aware, commanding, stubborn and possessed of an iron will. In ten years, their drive, off the pitch and on it, changed the face of football. Their Madrid won five European Cups, eight league titles, one Spanish Cup and one Intercontinental Cup.

Madrid's brilliance in those initial five European Cups proved inspirational in the club sphere. Bernabeu and aide Raimundo Saporta had encouraged French sports newspaper *L'Equipe* in the competition's creation. Later Bernabeu would be awarded the Legion d'Honneur, one of the few of his many personal awards that he valued.

Di Stefano, above all, was the son Bernabeu never had. This rendered their eventual schism personally shattering. The catalyst was Madrid's defeat by Internazionale in the 1964 European Cup final. Di Stefano was now 38. Bernabeu decided his contract should not be renewed but he should be handed a newly created role of all-powerful football manager.

Di Stefano, furious, refused. He wanted to play on. So he walked out on Bernabeu to join Kubala, his old friend and rival, at Espanyol. Bernabeu never forgave him. He would barely demean himself ever to mention Di Stefano's name again.

Bernabeu, in the post-Di Stefano era, saw Madrid win a further 12 major trophies but only one further European Cup. He remained a hands-on president, influential in star signings such as Amancio and Uli Stielike. His presidency was always all about "The Cause", never about himself. Bernabeu and his wife lived frugally on his government pension. He paid his own travel costs on away trips, wearing the same ageing suits and worn-down shoes. Most of the club staff earned more than Bernabeu's modest state stipend.

As he entered his 80s, conceding occasional unpredictable and oftentimes intemperate interviews, the club began to drift. He made no provision for his succession, so Madrid stuttered through a sequence of glory-glazed successors who led the club, despite further success, deep into debt.

More than 20 years after his death it was Bernabeu's legacy that came to the rescue. In the 1950s, Bernabeu had built a modest "sports city" in the stadium's shadow. Florentino Perez negotiated a reclassification of the land for urban development. The sale wiped out the club's debt, financed a new training centre and the launch of the *Galacticos* era with a further nine Champions Leagues.

Bernabeu's fellow directors, in 1955, had insisted on baptising Chamartin the Estadio Santiago Bernabeu. The man is long gone, but his legend lives on with every match report.

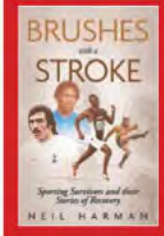
**Madrid appointed Bernabeu as provisional president. He told his wife: "Don't worry, it's only for a year." By the time of his death in 1978, that year had stretched to 35**

**Bernabeu's legacy...Real Madrid's famous stadium in all its glory after its latest renovation**

# BOOKS THIS MONTH

**1974**
*By Marvin Close*
*(Pitch Publishing, £16.99)*

This book whisks you back half a century to discover the major matches, controversies and seismic stories that lit up football in that momentous year. From Shankly's retirement and a heart-breaking follow-up episode, to Revie's England appointment and Clough's infamous 44-day reign at Leeds – it's all here. *1974: Football In The Seventies*, is a richly detailed portrait of a sport – and a society – on the cusp of transformation.




**BRUSHES WITH A STROKE**
*By Neil Harman*
*(Pitch Publishing, £14.99)*

*Brushes with a Stroke* is the inspirational account of how the human spirit need not be crushed by the debilitating effects of a stroke. It tells seven vivid sporting stories – including those of Olympian Michael Johnson and footballer Noel Blake – which reveal tales of doubt, fear and ultimately of fierce determination in the face of a frightening condition.

Jonathan WILSON
TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

# Building for the future

***The Under-20 World Cup can be a valuable tool for developing players – as Argentina demonstrated***

There has never been a run of success in any major international youth tournament quite like Argentina enjoyed at the Under-20 World Cup between 1995 and 2007. They won five out of seven editions in that 12-year span, which only made it all the more baffling that they won nothing at senior level from 1994 to 2020. Yet it was in that run of success that the foundations were laid for glory in Qatar.

The youth set-up was created by Jose Pekerman, who moved to the senior job for the 2006 World Cup. "The most important thing in the youth divisions," said Hugo Tocalli, who worked as Pekerman's assistant for 14 years, "is not to form teams in order to win games and tournaments, but to keep in mind that we are forming players. We must see ourselves as developers and not make them train and think as professionals, because they're not. It's not that 'win or win' mentality that makes you a better player. In the youth scenario, the victory without a future is not useful."

It took that future a long time to arrive. Argentina kept messing up at the last. In the six Copas America between 2004 and 2019, they finished runners-up four times and third once. Two injuries in the space of two second-half minutes cost them in their World Cup quarter-final against Germany in 2006. As Tocalli said, though, in tournament football there can be no guarantees; luck inevitably plays a part. But that doesn't mean that planning is pointless. "I'm a fan of long-time projects," he said. "They offer results. Look at Spain, it started with the youth teams...and the same with Germany, [Jurgen] Klinsmann and then [Joachim] Low."

By the time Argentina did finally win the World Cup for the third time, in 2022, only three players from those youth campaigns remained: Lionel Messi, who had won in 2005, and Angel Di Maria and Papu Gomez, who had won in 2007. Yet the influence of Pekerman remained. It was he who, as national coach, selected Messi for his first senior World Cup in 2006, while the coach, Lionel Scaloni, and two of his assistants, Pablo Aimar and Walter Samuel, were part of Pekerman's squad that won the Under-20 World Cup in Malaysia in 1997. There seemed something appropriate about the fact that, 27 years after Pekerman had won his first Under-20 World Cup in Qatar, it should be in Qatar that Argentina brought his era to its glorious apotheosis.

Yugoslavia offer another example of a great youth side that – eventually – enjoyed success at senior level. The squad that won the Under-20 World Cup in Chile in 1987 was not planned in the way that Pekerman's teams were. Rather it was patched together through political expediency and ended up being dominated by Croatians. They were brilliant,

**End of an era... Argentina with the Under-20 World Cup in 2007 in Canada**

> "In the youth scenario, the victory without a future is not useful"
>
> Former Argentina youth coach Hugo Tocalli

**World youth champion...Lionel Messi after winning the 2005 trophy**

though, and won the tournament, leading Ivica Osim, who had been appointed national team head coach after the 1986 World Cup, to devise a succession plan. He would stick with the older generation for Euro '88, look to integrate some of the youth side by 1990 and then have them making up the bulk of his squad for Euro '92.

As it turned out, though, other forces were at work. A heavy home defeat to England cost Yugoslavia their place at the Euros in 1988, leading to a barrage of media criticism that only intensified as the political situation deteriorated. Although Yugoslavia reached the quarter-final of the 1990 World Cup and qualified impressively for Euro '92, the outbreak of civil war led to their expulsion from that tournament. Osim's plan was never given time to take effect. But when Croatia reached the semi-final of the World Cup in 1998, five of their team had been part of that Under-20 squad – a remarkable number given, in 1987, Under-20 squads comprised only 18 players and they were drawn from across all six component republics of Yugoslavia.

The Spain side that won in 1999 featured Iker Casillas, Xavi and Carlos Marchena who would win the World Cup 11 years later, but equally there are plenty of sides who have achieved success at the Under-20 World Cup who did not go on to great things. Although the Brazil team that won in 2011 featured Casemiro, Oscar, Philippe Coutinho, Danilo and Alex Sandro, it's been a long time since Brazil threatened to win a World Cup. The Ghana of 2009 and the Serbia of 2015 have never achieved what it seemed like they might. Nothing in youth development is certain; there are always external factors – and fortune – waiting to intervene.

But as the examples of Spain and especially Pekerman's Argentina prove, the Under-20 World Cup, as part of a coordinated programme, can both offer valuable experience and be a guide to future success at senior level.

*The 2025 Under-20 World Cup kicks off in Chile on September 27. We'll review the competition in our December issue*

## Gilberto MORA

*(Mexico & Tijuana)*

Mora made headlines by becoming Mexico's youngest-ever player during the summer's CONCACAF Gold Cup, and the 16-year-old's three appearances weren't just cameos – he played a big part in *El Tri's* victory, setting up the only goal in the semi-final.

He seems sure to be involved for the co-hosts at next year's World Cup, but that doesn't mean he's skipping the Under-20s event. "It's always an honour to wear the national team shirt, whether it's with the senior side or the Under-20s. Playing in this World Cup is a dream," he said during a recent training camp.

Mora can't move abroad until he turns 18 in October 2026, but that won't stop Europe's biggest clubs queuing up to sign him – especially if he impresses in Chile.

**Neiser VILLARREAL**
*(Colombia & Millonarios)*
Since topping the scoring charts at the South American Under-20 Championship with eight goals in Venezuela in February, the winger has become a regular for Millonarios.

**Rento TAKAOKA**
*(Japan & Valenciennes)*
Southampton signed the teenage striker after he impressed at the 2023 Under-17 World Cup, and have sent him on loan for the season to French third-tier side Valenciennes.

**Kparobo ARIERHI**
*(Nigeria & Mjondalen)*
Scored consistently in the Nigerian league to earn a move to the Norwegian second tier, where the goals have continued to flow. Premier League scouts will be watching him.

**Valentin ATANGANA**
*(France & Al Ahli)*
The France skipper is an all-action midfielder, named in the Team of the Tournament at last year's European Under-19 Championship as *Les Bleuets* reached the final.

OBITUARIES

Zimbabwe star... Ndoro scores at the 2017 AFCON

**Tendai NDORO**
(1985-2025)
Former Zimbabwe and Orlando Pirates forward who scored five goals for his country in 14 games between 2013 and 2017, including one at the 2017 Africa Cup of Nations. Ndoro spent two seasons with Pirates, netting 23 goals and finishing as the league's second-top scorer in 2016-17, and had a brief spell at Saudi Arabian side Al Faisaly before returning to South Africa with Ajax Cape Town and Highlands Park. Retired in 2020 after a stint with Al Orouba in Oman.

**Gerry HARRISON**
(1936-2025)
English television football commentator and sports broadcasting executive who covered six World Cups for *ITV*.

**Jimmy BONE**
(1949-2025)
Scotland inside-forward who earned two caps, scoring one goal. Began his career with Partick Thistle and went on to play for Norwich City, Sheffield United, Celtic, St Mirren, Toronto Blizzard, Hong Kong Rangers and Hearts, as well as two spells with Arbroath. Bone helped Partick and Norwich win promotion to their top flights and was also part of the former's shock 4-1 Scottish League Cup final win over Celtic in 1971. Later managed Zambia's Power Dynamos to victory in the 1991 African Cup Winners' Cup.

**Razak OMOTOYOSSI**
(1985-2025)
Nigerian-born striker who is Benin's third all-time top scorer with 21 goals – behind only former Premier League stars Stephane Sessegnon and Steve Mounie – and helped the Cheetahs qualify for the 2008 and 2010 Africa Cup of Nations. Changed clubs almost every year during a career in Benin, Moldova, Sweden, Saudi Arabia, France, Egypt, Turkey, Morocco and Ghana.

Nomadic... Omotoyossi playing for Al Nassr in Saudi Arabia in 2008

**Dunshee de ABRANCHES**
(1936-2025)
President of Brazilian giants Flamengo for a memorable two years between 1981 and 1983 when they won the Carioca title, Copa Libertadores and then Intercontinental Cup with a magnificent 3-0 victory over Liverpool in Tokyo.

**Dan TANA**
(1935-2025)
Dobrivoje Tanasijevic, born in what was then Yugoslavia, enjoyed an extraordinary career. A promising footballer, he defected to Belgium while on a youth team tour with Red Star Belgrade in 1952. Joined Anderlecht but, as a defector, could not play for two years and was loaned to Hannover in Germany. Later moved to Canada then down to Los Angeles. His new life as a Hollywood restaurateur enabled him to dabble in football, notably as the chairman under whom Brentford were once promoted out of the fourth division. Later a member of the FA's international committee.

**Bud BROCKEN**
(1957-2025)
Dutch winger who played five times for the Netherlands in 1983. Totalled almost 400 games with Willem II in spells at the start and towards the end of a career that included stints with Den Bosch, Birmingham City and Groningen.

**Mustapha TAHIRI**
(1953-2025)
Son of Algerian parents who helped Morocco finish third at the AFCON in 1980. Defender Tahiri was a Moroccan champion in 1975 with MC Oujda.

**Ryszard BUDKA**
(1935-2025)
Defender who won the Polish league and cup in the mid-1960s with Wisla Krakow, where he spent 13 years between 1955 and 1968. Two caps for Poland.

**Fernando CRUZ**
(1940-2025)
Terrier-like left-back in the Benfica team that won the European Cup in 1961 and 1962, as well as eight Portuguese league titles and four domestic cups. Played over 300 games for Benfica across 11 seasons before retiring after one year with Paris Saint-Germain. Won 11 caps and was a non-playing member of Portugal's 1966 third-place finishing World Cup squad.

**Issaad DHOMAR**
(1933-2025)
Algerian FA president in the mid-1980s when the national team reached the World Cup finals in Mexico. Formerly a midfielder, he won two caps in 1963.

**Martin LAAMERS**
(1967-2025)
Ex-Vitesse midfielder who played over 300 games for the club and twice for the Netherlands, making his debut as a substitute in a friendly against Brazil in 1989. Later played in Belgium for KRC Harelbeke, Gent and Nieuwkerken.

**Beno KAPOSZTA**
(1942-2025)
Right-back who played 19 times for Hungary between 1964 and 1969 including the 1966 World Cup and the dramatic group-stage defeat of Brazil. Spent all of his senior club career with Ujpest, winning the league title six times and the domestic cup twice.

**Abdellah LIEGEON**
(1957-2025)
Algeria right-back who moved to France as a child. Started out at Besancon then moved to Monaco, where he won the league and cup, before ending his club career with Strasbourg. Was called up by France boss Michel Hidalgo for the 1982 World Cup but rejected the call, instead opting for Algeria with whom he appeared at the 1986 finals.

**Moustapha SALL**
(1967-2025)
National coach of Mauritania in 2006-07, who launched his tenure in dramatic fashion with a record 8-2 victory over Somalia.

**Hans-Bert MATOUL**
(1945-2025)
Starred in East Germany for Chemie Leipzig, for whom he hit the winner in their 1966 cup final win over Lokomotive Stendal, and then local rivals Lokomotive Leipzig, with whom he was 20-goal league top scorer in 1973-74. Netted one goal in three appearances for East Germany in the run-up to the 1974 World Cup, but was omitted from the squad that played in West Germany.

**Richard TYLINSKI**
(1937-2025)
Centre-back who played 312 times for Saint-Etienne in winning the league title in 1957 and 1964 and the cup in 1962. One of ten France internationals from a Polish family background from the central France village of La Combelle. Played, surprisingly, just three times for *Les Bleus*.

**Theo VONK**
(1947-2025)
Dutch central defender who made more than 300 appearances for AZ, winning the Dutch Cup in 1978.

*Words by Keir Radnedge & Mark Gleeson*

# DON'T MISS

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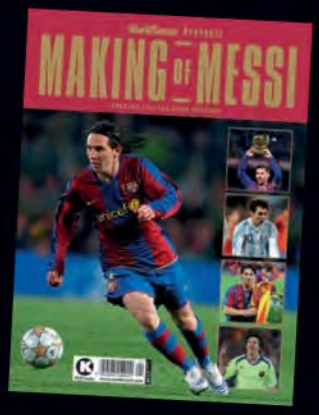


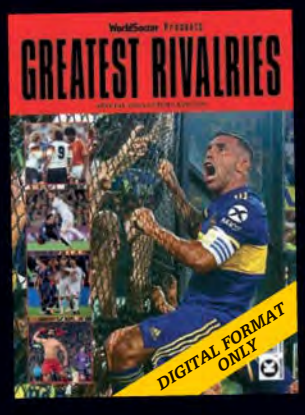


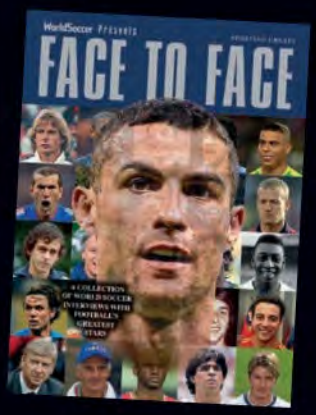


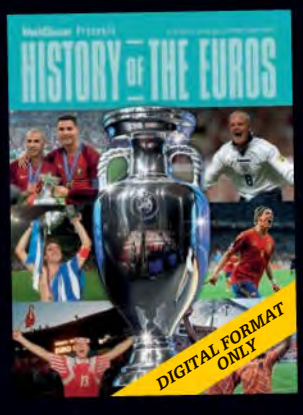

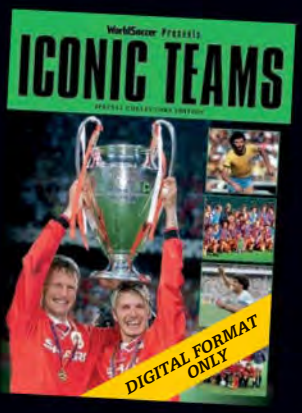


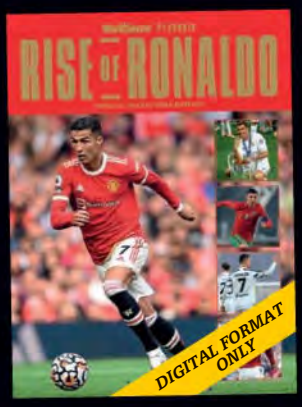

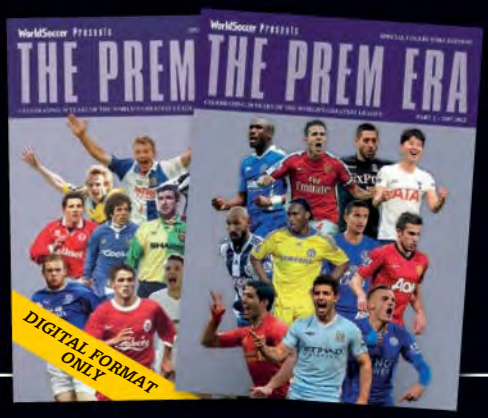

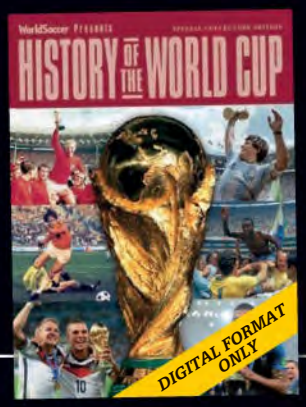


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"Everybody in the Indian football ecosystem is worried, hurt, scared about the uncertainty we are faced with"

**India legend Sunil Chhetri on the delayed Indian Super League, which should have kicked off in September**

# The month in numbers

The facts and stats that have caught our eye in the world of football this month...

## 11
German Super Cups won by Bayern Munich after the Bavarians defeated Stuttgart 2-1 in August.

## 9
Matches (six in the Leagues Cup, three in MLS) that Inter Miami striker Luis Suarez was suspended for after spitting at a Seattle Sounders staff member at the end of the Leagues Cup final.

## 4
World Cup qualifying matches that Germany have lost in their entire history following September's shock 2-0 defeat to Slovakia.

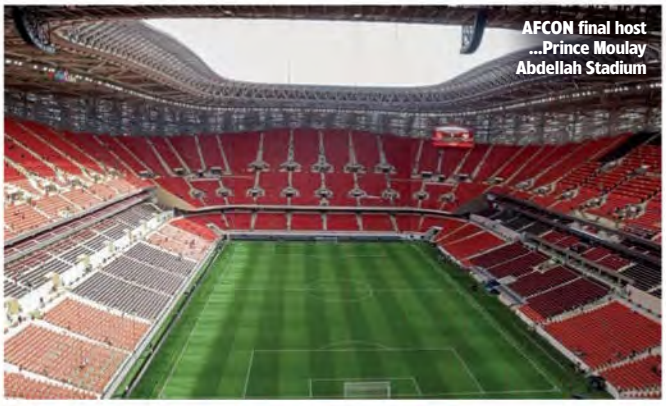
## 21
Shirt number that Ruben Neves will wear for Portugal, inheriting it from his late friend Diogo Jota.

## 52
International goals scored by Kylian Mbappe, just five behind France's all-time top scorer Olivier Giroud.

## 3
PFA Player of the Year awards won by Mo Salah, who collected the trophy at a presentation in August. No player has won it more often.

Another honour... Salah

## 1,391
Competitive appearances made by Brazilian goalkeeper Fabio Deivson Lopes Maciel, when the 44-year-old broke the world record of former England keeper Peter Shilton.



AFCON final host ...Prince Moulay Abdellah Stadium

## $75m
Reported cost of Morocco's new 69,500-capacity Prince Moulay Abdellah Stadium, which opened in September and will host the 2025 AFCON final in January.

## 22
Fans injured in violent clashes during the Copa Sudamericana last-16 tie between Independiente and Universidad de Chile. The former were disqualified from the competition, pending an appeal.

## 39
Years and 239 days, the age of Brighton's James Milner when he scored against Manchester City to become the second-oldest scorer in Premier League history. Remarkably, he is also the league's second-youngest goalscorer.

## $9.76bn
Total global spending during the summer transfer window according to FIFA figures, an increase of more than 50 per cent on 2024.

## 1.07
Erling Haaland's international scoring ratio after he notched his 48th goal in his 45th Norway game.

## 609
Seconds that it took Brazilian forward Ludmila to score three goals in Chicago Stars' National Women's Soccer League clash with North Carolina Courage, the fastest hat-trick in the league's history.

## 39
World Cup qualifying goals scored by Cristiano Ronaldo, matching the record set by Guatemala's Carlos Ruiz.

## $6,730
Top price of tickets at the 2026 World Cup, ranging from $60 for group games to $6,730 for the final, with dynamic pricing set to be used.

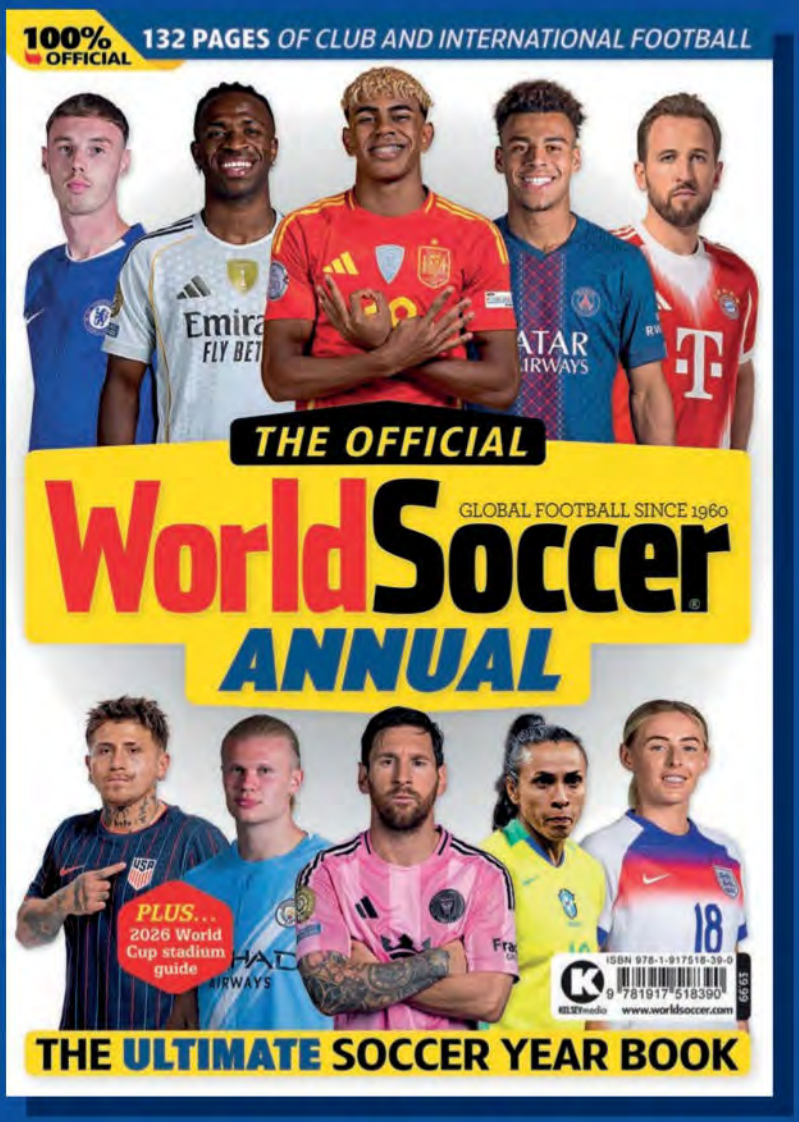
## 34.88km/h
Average top speed that Wolves' new signing Jackson Tchatchoua clocked last season, making him the fastest player in Serie A.

## £14.25m
Reported fee paid by Bayern Munich to sign Chelsea's Nicolas Jackson for the season – a record for a loan deal. The Germans can make the transfer permanent for £56.2m.

## LATE LOAN SIGNINGS

| | |
|---|---|
| **Leon BAILEY** | *(Aston Villa to Roma)* |
| **Claudio ECHEVERRI** | *(Manchester City to Bayer Leverkusen)* |
| **DOUGLAS LUIZ** | *(Juventus to Nottingham Forest)* |
| **Edson ALVAREZ** | *(West Ham United to Fenerbahce)* |
| **Luis SINISTERRA** | *(Bournemouth to Cruzeiro)* |
| **Ladislav KREJCI** | *(Girona to Wolverhampton Wanderers)* |
| **Arthur VERMEEREN** | *(RB Leipzig to Marseille)* |
| **Benjamin PAVARD** | *(Internazionale to Marseille)* |
| **FLORENTINO LUIS** | *(Benfica to Burnley)* |
| **Jakub KIWIOR** | *(Arsenal to Porto)* |
| **Lois OPENDA** | *(RB Leipzig to Juventus)* |
| **Lucas BELTRAN** | *(Fiorentina to Valencia)* |
| **Manuel AKANJI** | *(Manchester City to Internazionale)* |
| **Matt O'RILEY** | *(Brighton to Marseille)* |
| **Nico GONZALEZ** | *(Juventus to Atletico Madrid)* |
| **Nicolo ZANIOLO** | *(Galatasaray to Udinese)* |
| **Piero HINCAPIE** | *(Bayer Leverkusen to Arsenal)* |
| **Rasmus HOJLUND** | *(Manchester United to Napoli)* |
| **Yunus MUSAH** | *(Milan to Atalanta)* |
| **Victor BONIFACE** | *(Bayer Leverkusen to Werder Bremen)* |
| **Harvey ELLIOTT** | *(Liverpool to Aston Villa)* |
| **Jadon SANCHO** | *(Manchester United to Aston Villa)* |
| **Oleksandr ZINCHENKO** | *(Arsenal to Nottingham Forest)* |
| **Manor SOLOMON** | *(Tottenham Hotspur to Villarreal)* |
| **Andre ONANA** | *(Manchester United to Trabzonspor)* |

# BRAND NEW
# DON'T MISS...

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"I'll get the opportunity to play in the Champions League for the first time, which will be a great challenge"

**Young Argentina forward Facundo Buonanotte after joining Chelsea on loan from Brighton & Hove Albion. Just days later, the 20-year-old was left out of the Blues' Champions League squad for the league stage**

# 12 MOVES *you might have missed...*

TRANSFERS ★ LOANS ★ SACKINGS ★ HIRINGS ★ SWITCHES ★ RETIREMENTS

## Domenico TEDESCO

**Fenerbahce** hired the former RB Leipzig and Belgium manager after sacking Jose Mourinho, who was fired for failing to qualify for the Champions League.

## Sergen YALCIN

**Besiktas** also fired a former Manchester United manager in Ole Gunnar Solskjaer and turned to Yalcin who led them to the league title in 2020-21.

## Kasper HJULMAND

After Erik ten Hag was axed by **Bayer Leverkusen**, the 2023-24 Bundesliga champions turned to Hjulmand, who led Denmark to the semi-finals of Euro 2020.

## Fernando SANTOS

The former Portugal coach, who led his country to Euro 2016 glory, was shown the door by **Azerbaijan** after overseeing the team to nine defeats and no wins in 11 games.

## Adrien RABIOT

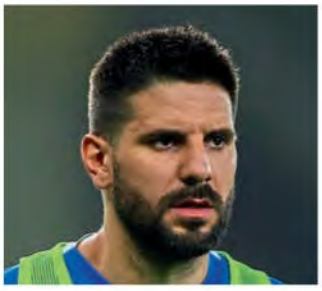
Transfer-listed by Marseille after a fight with team-mate Jonathan Rowe, the former Juventus man returned to Italy, joining **Milan** for €10m. Rowe joined Bologna.

## Ismael BENNACER

In a bid to reclaim the Croatian league title, **Dinamo Zagreb** signed the Algeria midfielder on loan from Milan. Bennacer spent the second half of last season at Marseille.

## Renato SANCHES

After returning to his boyhood club Benfica on loan last season, the Portugal midfielder joined Greek giants **Panathinaikos** on loan for the 2025-26 campaign from PSG.



## Aleksandar MITROVIC

The Serbia striker left Saudi side Al Hilal for **Al Rayyan** in Qatar. The 31-year-old scored 68 goals in 79 games, but fell down the pecking order after Darwin Nunez's arrival.

## Ben CHILWELL

Having spent the summer seeking a move away from Chelsea, the left-back completed a free transfer to **Strasbourg**, who share the same owners as the Blues.

## Ilkay GUNDOGAN

The midfielder left Manchester City for Turkish side **Galatasaray** to link up with former City club-mate Leroy Sane. The midfielder was born in Germany to Turkish parents.

## Christian ERIKSEN

Eriksen, 33, joined Bundesliga side **Wolfsburg**, having been released by Manchester United in July. The Denmark midfielder played 107 games for the Red Devils.

## DELE Alli

The former Tottenham Hotspur and England midfielder was released by **Como**. Dele joined the Italian side in January, but was sent off against Milan in his only appearance.

"We will keep pursuing him because I know from my conversations with Mason and his family that he loves Jamaica…He wants to concentrate on club football"

**Jamaica boss Steve McClaren on Marseille striker Mason Greenwood, who has obtained a passport for the Caribbean nation without formally committing**

# SUMMER 2025 TRANSFER WINDOW

**A round-up of deals done in the final weeks of the summer window...**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| £125m | **Alexander ISAK** | *(Newcastle United to Liverpool)* |
| £69m | **Nick WOLTEMADE** | *(Stuttgart to Newcastle United)* |
| £67.5m | **Eberechi EZE** | *(Crystal Palace to Arsenal)* |
| £55m | **Yoane WISSA** | *(Brentford to Newcastle United)* |
| £51.8m | **Xavi SIMONS** | *(RB Leipzig to Tottenham Hotspur)* |
| £42.5m | **Dango OUATTARA** | *(Bournemouth to Brentford)* |
| £40m | **Mateus FERNANDES** | *(Southampton to West Ham United)* |
| £40m | **Alejandro GARNACHO** | *(Manchester United to Chelsea)* |
| £40m | **Jacob RAMSEY** | *(Aston Villa to Newcastle United)* |
| £37.5m | **Omari HUTCHINSON** | *(Ipswich Town to Nottingham Forest)* |
| £36m | **Christopher NKUNKU** | *(Chelsea to Milan)* |
| £35.2m | **Tyler DIBLING** | *(Southampton to Everton)* |
| £35m | **Dilane BAKWA** | *(Strasbourg to Nottingham Forest)* |
| £34.6m | **KEVIN** | *(Shakhtar Donetsk to Fulham)* |
| £30m | **James McATEE** | *(Manchester City to Nottingham Forest)* |
| £27.8m | **Eliesse BEN SEGHIR** | *(Monaco to Bayer Leverkusen)* |
| £27.8m | **Roger FERNANDES** | *(Braga to Al Ittihad)* |
| £27m | **Georges MIKAUTADZE** | *(Lyon to Villarreal)* |
| £26.8m | **Wilfried SINGO** | *(Monaco to Galatasaray)* |
| £26.1m | **Arnaud KALIMUENDO** | *(Rennes to Nottingham Forest)* |
| £26.1m | **YEREMY Pino** | *(Villarreal to Crystal Palace)* |
| £26m | **Gianluigi DONNARUMMA** | *(Paris Saint-Germain to Manchester City)* |
| £26m | **Giovanni LEONI** | *(Parma to Liverpool)* |
| £25.1m | **Amine ADLI** | *(Bayer Leverkusen to Bournemouth)* |
| £25m | **Ben GANNON-DOAK** | *(Liverpool to Bournemouth)* |
| £23.9m | **Ugurcan CAKIR** | *(Trabzonspor to Galatasaray)* |
| £22.6m | **Tolu AROKODARE** | *(Genk to Wolverhampton Wanderers)* |
| £21.8m | **Valentin ATANGANA** | *(Reims to Al Ahli)* |
| £21.8m | **Loic BADE** | *(Sevilla to Bayer Leverkusen)* |
| £21.8m | **Kingsley COMAN** | *(Bayern Munich to Al Nassr)* |
| £21.8m | **Equi FERNANDEZ** | *(Al Qadsiah to Bayer Leverkusen)* |
| £21.8m | **Nikola KRSTOVIC** | *(Lecce to Atalanta)* |
| £21.8m | **Roberto PICCOLI** | *(Cagliari to Fiorentina)* |
| £21.3m | **Renato VEIGA** | *(Chelsea to Villarreal)* |
| £20.9m | **Conrad HARDER** | *(Sporting to RB Leipzig)* |
| £20m | **Nayef AGUERD** | *(West Ham United to Marseille)* |
| £20m | **Jaydee CANVOT** | *(Toulouse to Crystal Palace)* |
| £19.6m | **Kerem AKTURKOGLU** | *(Benfica to Fenerbahce)* |
| £19.6m | **Fabio SILVA** | *(Wolverhampton Wanderers to Borussia Dortmund)* |
| £19.1m | **ANTONY** | *(Manchester United to Real Betis)* |
| £19.1m | **Fotis IOANNIDIS** | *(Panathinaikos to Sporting)* |
| £18.3m | **Senne LAMMENS** | *(Royal Antwerp to Manchester United)* |
| £18m | **Noah OKAFOR** | *(Milan to Leeds United)* |
| £17.5m | **Sindre Walle EGELI** | *(Nordsjaelland to Ipswich Town)* |
| £17.4m | **Brian BROBBEY** | *(Ajax to Sunderland)* |
| £17.4m | **Carney CHUKWUEMEKA** | *(Chelsea to Borussia Dortmund)* |
| £17.4m | **Andy DIOUF** | *(Lens to Internazionale)* |
| £17.4m | **Dodi LUKEBAKIO** | *(Sevilla to Benfica)* |
| £17.4m | **ROMULO** | *(Goztepe to RB Leipzig)* |
| £13.8m | **Julio ENCISO** | *(Brighton to Strasbourg)* |
| £13m | **Breel EMBOLO** | *(Monaco to Rennes)* |
| £12.1m | **EDERSON** | *(Manchester City to Fenerbahce)* |
| £10.4m | **Hamza IGAMANE** | *(Rangers to Lille)* |
| £10m | **Andreas PEREIRA** | *(Fulham to Palmeiras)* |
| £6.5m | **Marco ASENSIO** | *(Paris Saint-Germain to Fenerbahce)* |
| Free | **Cesar AZPILICUETA** | *(Atletico Madrid to Sevilla)* |
| Free | **Alexis SANCHEZ** | *(Udinese to Sevilla)* |
| Free | **Jamie VARDY** | *(Leicester City to Cremonese)* |

Arsenal new boy ...Eberechi Eze

Spurs midfielder ...Xavi Simons

Everton youngster... Tyler Dibling

# Libyan Premier League

The final stages of the competition's 2024-25 campaign were played in northern Italy

**Behind closed doors...Al Ittihad Tripoli v Al Hilal Benghazi in the Arena Civica** *Credit: Damiano Benzoni*

In recent months, plenty has been written about Italian league games being taken abroad. Yet while this debate has raged on, Italy has been hosting foreign league games on its own shores, with the Libyan Premier League playing out its final phase in Milan and its suburbs.

This was the second year in a row that the competition has been staged in Italy, in an arrangement that went beyond football and was arranged through political and diplomatic input.

In May 2024, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni visited Tripoli to discuss the details of the so-called Mattei Plan, which envisages deepening cooperation between Italy and several African countries. During the talks, football became a means of diplomacy; matches from the Libyan Premier League could be played in Italy in exchange for stricter regulations against illegal migration.

Due to the political instability in Libya, the country has not had a unified championship for several years. Instead, the teams are divided into four regional groups (two eastern and two western), with the top three from each advancing to a play-off group for each zone. The top three in each of these pools then advance to a final championship round.

Libya does have its own facilities – the renovated 28 March Stadium in Benghazi was inaugurated at the beginning of this year, with the likes of Roberto Carlos, David Trezeguet and Clarence Seedorf in attendance – but the decision to hold the championship in Italy brought other benefits.

"There is a clear marketing objective: to elevate the visibility of Libyan football, attract more international attention, and align with global trends where leagues stage high-profile matches abroad", explains the local journalist Morad Dakhil.

Last year, the matches were held further south in Avellino, L'Aquila and Teramo, though it did not pass without incident. After winning the title, the Benghazi club Al Nasr boycotted the trophy presentation in protest at the refusal to recognise eastern Libya.

Once again there were three venues for this year's games: the Arena Civica in Milan, Stadio Ernesto Breda in Sesto San Giovanni on the outskirts of the city, and Stadio Citta di Meda in nearby Monza. The former is a historic stadium, first opened in 1807, where derbies between Milan and Internazionale were played before the construction of the San Siro, but it has not hosted top-level football for years. The other two are currently home to teams in the lower leagues of Italian football.

Upon their arrival in Milan, some of the participating teams expressed concern about the quality of the pitches and hotels in which they were accommodated, and even threatened to return straight back to Libya. An emergency meeting between the participants brought resolution.

Undoubtedly the standout fixture was the Tripoli derby, which has a long history. Al Ittihad were founded in 1944, and then six years later several players, wanting to play more often, left to form Al Ahli. Over the years, they would become the two most successful teams in the country (Ittihad with 18 titles, Ahli with 13).

At the beginning of this century, both clubs came under the influence of Al-Saadi Gaddafi, the son of dictator Muammar Gaddafi, who played first for Al Ahli and then for Al Ittihad.

The overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in 2011 brought to the fore the dark side of the rivalry between the two Tripoli teams. Since then, fans have been banned from attending derbies in Libya due to security concerns, but this hasn't reduced the tension between them. In June, a match was abandoned in the 38th minute after Al Ahli supporters invaded the pitch following a goal by the opposition. The violence spread outside the stadium, resulting in the Al Ittihad bus being set on fire.

> Due to the political instability in Libya, the country has not had a unified championship for several years

For the reasons described, access to the match in Sesto San Giovanni was prohibited for fans, and all those present in the stadium were thoroughly checked by Italian police. Yet as the match began there were several dozen supporters outside the stadium, looking for a chance to enter. Some of them had travelled from Libya specifically for the match, even though they knew their chances of watching were slim. They were not allowed in, which led to an escalation of tension and a fight between the fans themselves.

As soon as Ahli and Ittihad emerged, the hostilities between the two teams became truly clear, with neither sides' players attempting to shake hands and only a few greeting the referee.

Given the simmering tensions, the only surprise was that it took until the 68th minute for them to spill over. With Ittihad trailing 4-1, a seemingly harmless foul led to clashes between players from both teams, and a player from each – including the Ittihad goalkeeper – being sent off. For a good 20 minutes, a football was not even kicked as melees broke out all over the pitch. At one point, two Ittihad players even had to be separated after squaring up to each other.

Watching on, Libya coach Aliou Cisse made his exit. The Senegalese legend was in attendance to cast his eye over his national team players ahead of the September World Cup qualifiers, but on this occasion the only thing on display was their petulance rather than any footballing ability.

With technical and security teams engulfing the pitch, the game finally resumed with the intervention of the local football association representative Valentina Battistini.

After the additional 20 minutes of added time had been played, the game ended without any further goals. Al Ahli's 4-1 victory was followed a week later in the final matchday with a 2-0 win over Al Hilal Benghazi, securing them the league crown.

Winning the 14th title in the club's history was celebrated in Tripoli on Martyrs' Square, while the trophy presentation took place behind closed doors hundreds of miles away in a virtually unknown Italian town. It is a situation that seems to suit nobody, neither the Libyan teams and their fans nor the Italian officials tasked with overseeing the chaos. But for now, the political situation is more influential.

*Teodor Borisov*

# eyewitness

Stefan Bienkowski reports

GERMANY

## The Hamburg derby's Bundesliga return

### HSV's first top-flight game at the Volksparkstadion since 2018 was against their fierce local rivals

The Hamburg derby doesn't come along too often, or at least not in the top flight. August's clash at the Volksparkstadion between HSV and St Pauli was the first time both clubs had faced one another in the Bundesliga since 2011. They met several times in the second tier between 2018 and 2024, until St Pauli went up to the Bundesliga as champions. Hamburg followed them into the top flight last season, finally bringing an end to seven torturous years in the second tier.

Any prospect of the home fans approaching the much-missed clash with modesty or humility was quickly dashed when an almighty tifo was unveiled by the club's ultras ahead of kick-off. It carried the city's historic Hanseatic emblem, a white castle on a red background flanked ▸

***Gemeinsam Gegen Alle*...Hamburg fans send a message to their neighbours**

Opening goal...St Pauli's Polish defender Adam Dzwigala opens the scoring after a clever corner-kick routine

on either side by regal lions, and the message: "*Gemeinsam Gegen Alle*" ("Together against everyone"). Fans of the home side were making their message perfectly clear: they were the city's only important club and were once again prepared to take on the world.

Opponents St Pauli, in typical fashion, took a more humorous approach to proceedings, instead opting to create a somewhat odd cartoon of fans climbing up a wooden Trojan horse with cheeky grins on their face. Below was a simple retort to their cross-city rivals: "*St Pauli Ist Die Einzige Möglichkeit*" ("St Pauli is the only option"). In response to HSV's self-importance, their cross-city rivals simply stated that they didn't care.

While fan sentiment in heated derbies can often be chalked up to emotion, both sets of fans correctly summed their respective club's current standings: one determined to prove themselves on the biggest stage, the other entirely at ease with their surroundings.

Although Merlin Polzin's side had kicked off the new season with a hard-fought 0-0 draw away to Borussia Monchengladbach a week earlier, this felt like the true unveiling of HSV back in the Bundesliga for the first time since 2018.

The club clearly felt they had a point to prove against St Pauli, the relative minnows based near the Reeperbahn in the city centre, who claim to be HSV's only real geographical rivals. In many ways, this was the perfect first hurdle on HSV's journey to regain their former standing: in order to get back towards the top of German football, they first had to get back on top in their own city.

HSV's desire to make a statement on their return to the German top flight was made abundantly clear in the club's pre-season marketing. Alongside the unveiling of a striking new home shirt, a deliberate throwback to the popular 1994-95 kit, HSV also released a dramatic promotional video showing former legends of the club in the Volksparkstadion dressing room, looking stoically beyond the camera and, presumably, towards a bright future alongside the club's current players. This was a club that had got used to success and was ready to get back to winning ways again. Upon all the posters, social media posts and videos was a smart re-write of the club's "only HSV" motto with a slight rewording of the original to now state: "the new HSV is back".

> This was the perfect first hurdle for HSV: in order to get back towards the top of German football, they first had to get back on top in their own city

An emotive message, no doubt, but one that conveniently ignored the last seven seasons of torment and self-sabotage in the second tier. And if football can be relied upon to do one thing, it's an ability to cut through the buzz off the pitch and show the truth of the matter when the first whistle is blown on it.

Welcome back... Hamburg supporters ahead of their team's Bundesliga return

Indeed, social media interactions, jersey sales and even well-worked tifos mattered very little in the opening stages of the match, when HSV tried to take the initiative but struggled to contain St Pauli's composed and well-worked counter attacks. Here, expectations met reality and the narrative around both clubs very quickly flipped.

As if to purposefully confirm that the orthodoxy of this rivalry was gone for good, the visitors took the lead through an exquisitely worked corner-kick routine. Arkadiusz Pyrka kicked the ball forward from the corner flag so casually that it looked like a mishit, inviting the on-running Mathias Pereira Lage to fire a low cross towards the near post. Centre-back Adam Dzwigala, holding off his marker, found the space to sneak a toe-poke past a bamboozled Daniel Heuer Fernandes in the HSV goal.

Little changed after the goal, with the visitors continuing to leap on any opportunity to counter and cut through the hosts. Just six minutes after the opener, Pereira Lage had the ball

***St Pauli Ist Die Einzige Möglichkeit***
**...the away end's response**

Flying the flag... St Pauli remain the city's top dogs for now

in the back of the net again, only for the referee to call the play back for what seemed like a very soft foul.

Pereira Lage might have ended the half with a brace, presented with a wonderful chance inside the box after a sharp one-two with Danel Sinani, only to drag his shot wide. Nevertheless, St Pauli went into the break with their heads held high and a game plan working wonders against their rivals.

HSV very nearly started the second half perfectly. A simple long pass up the pitch caught St Pauli's back-line sleeping, allowing Ransford Konigsdorffer to run through on goal and calmly slot the ball into the bottom corner. The stadium erupted as the fans, at long last, finally basked in the joy of a Bundesliga goal. Only, they went too soon. The anarchy in the stands was brought to an end by another VAR check, which ruled the HSV forward offside.

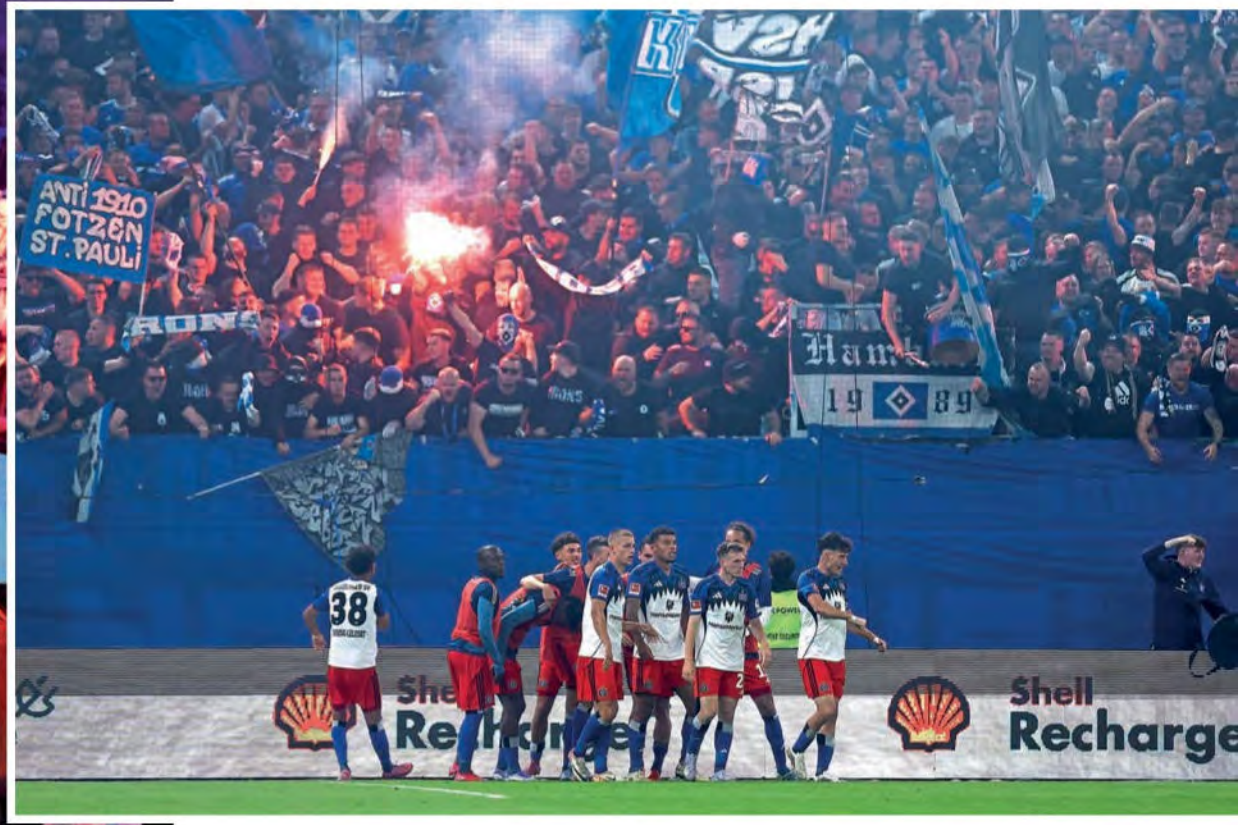
The home side continued to press for an equaliser as the second half unfolded but time and time again St Pauli proved to be the smarter, well-drilled side. Miro Muheim came closest, stinging the gloves of Nikola Vasilj with a close-range free-kick in the 53rd minute, but that was as good as it got. Even new signing Yussuf Poulsen, summoned from the bench to add additional firepower, couldn't help HSV find a way through.

The Dane, signed from RB Leipzig in the summer, was perhaps the most high-profile of the new arrivals, which also included former Arsenal midfielders Albert Sambi Lokonga and Fabio Vieira, Nicolas Capaldo, a two-time Austrian Bundesliga champion with Red Bull Salzburg, and French forward Rayan Phillippe, who scored twice against HSV in the colours of Eintracht Braunschweig last season.

Yet it was two St Pauli new boys who ultimately settled the game. On the hour mark, Joel Chima Fujita, a 23-year-old Japanese midfielder signed from Belgian side Sint-Truiden, jinked through a challenge before threading an exceptional ball through the HSV defence. Andreas Hountondji, on loan from Burnley, sprinted onto it, rounding Heuer Fernandes before finishing from an acute angle.

**HSV continued to press for an equaliser as the second half unfolded but time and time again St Pauli proved to be the smarter, well-drilled side**

Despite the fanfare, the talk and, above all else, the history, it was once again smart tactics, clear talent and




Punctured celebrations...VAR chalks off Hamburg's equalising goal

composure under pressure that allowed St Pauli to cut through their dishevelled opponents to double their lead.

As if to hammer home the point, the game's final act of note came from another St Pauli counter-attack, when Pereira Lage threatened to break into the opposing box on the left wing only to be clumsily hauled down by right wing-back Giorgi Gocholeishvili.

Elation...Andreas Hountondji celebrates with his St Pauli teammates after putting the result beyond doubt

As a result, the Georgia international was shown a second yellow card and any slim hopes of a comeback were ended, allowing St Pauli to celebrate their first Bundesliga victory at the Volksparkstadion since February 2011.

"We are very, very proud and very happy," said St Pauli head coach Alexander Blessin at full-time, before stating that he only noted two periods of the game when he felt like his side weren't in control of the match.

To his credit, Blessin's opposite number could only agree. "The difference is there in everything," admitted Polzin afterwards. "We lost a game...and I really don't care what the difference is between the second and first divisions."

And yet, it was those differences between HSV and St Pauli – the stark contrast between a plucky side newly promoted from the second tier and a battle-hardened club from the Bundesliga – that ultimately defined how the derby played out. And, by extension, how one of German football's most celebrated derbies has dramatically changed in recent years. HSV may feel as though they're back where they belong, but a lot has changed since they were last in the top tier of German football. And one of the biggest differences that they may now have to accept is that their rivals across the city now hold sway in Hamburg.

# eyewitness

Sid Lowe reports

SPAIN

## 'We painted hell blue'

### How Real Oviedo went all the way to the depths of Spanish football, twice, and came back again

**Battling the big boys...Oviedo's Haissem Hassan tackles Real Madrid winger Vinicius Junior**

Elena Estrada is 24, she's a law graduate who is preparing the entrance exams to become a civil servant and just before 9.30pm on August 24, the night Real Madrid played Real Oviedo, she got the first touch. Alongside her, receiving her left-footed pass, Carlos Llamedo got the second, 29,578 fans standing to applaud. Carlos studies industrial engineering and is about to begin a Masters degree. Like Elena, whose younger brother Nacho plays up front in the club's youth team, he is 24.

Season-ticket holders since they were born in Oviedo in the summer of 2001, together they took the honorary kick-off in the first home game of the 2025-26 season, symbols of life and loyalty. They stood as representatives of a community that refused to abandon its team, an entire generation: of those who never got to see Oviedo in La Liga again and those who had never seen them there in the first place, the place they sung about returning to somewhere they hadn't actually been – until now. Heroes of the muddy years, they called them.

Standing on the Carlos Tartiere pitch, Elena and Carlos wore matching white t-shirts. Written on them in blue lettering were the names of 168 football teams, most of whom you have probably never heard of, all whom Oviedo can be proud of. There is honour in the humility, the journey: this was not just their first home game of this season; it was their first in the first division for 24 seasons. The last time they had played a La Liga game here had been against Real Madrid too. Coincidence, or perhaps a kind of closure, decided that the next time would be against the same club, 8,841 days later.

Elena and Carlos embodied that. A lot of opponents had been to the Tartiere in their time as season-ticket holders, the names written across their t-shirts, the journey back never forgotten. They had seen Pumarin, Atletico Astorga, Colloto, Montaneros, Condal de Norena and Real Titanico. But, born after Oviedo were relegated in June 2001, they hadn't seen Madrid, hadn't seen Barcelona either. Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo had

**Back in the big time... Oviedo players ahead of their first La Liga home game in 24 years**

marked an epoch and played out their careers without coming to the Tartiere. Still Elena and Carlos, like thousands more, kept coming.

The last time Oviedo had played *Los Blancos*, it had actually been Madrid's C team, so far had they fallen. The night that Oviedo were relegated from La Liga back in June 2001, the Mallorca coach Luis Aragones tried to comfort Oviedo goalkeeper Esteban Suarez. "Whenever it rains, it clears," he said. A historic top-flight club, they would soon be back. Instead, it kept raining. It took a quarter of a century for Oviedo to return, for the Tartiere to host a first division game. "I'm sure this will be a special game for them," said Xabi Alonso ahead his first league test away from the Bernabeu.

But this wasn't just a case of a big team taking a long time to return. In the time since they last faced Madrid, Oviedo had been relegated two divisions in the same season, they'd had an owner on the run from Interpol and politicians trying to kill them off. Twice they had been on the verge of going out of business; both times, it was fans who came to their rescue, pulling them from the edge of the abyss.

The sun didn't come back out in 2001, despite Aragones' promise.

Instead, crisis came. Debts reached 7bn pesetas, a little over £40m. In 2003, they were relegated from the Second Division to the Second Division B, an 82-team league of four regional divisions. Then, after players denounced the club for not paying them, they were demoted again to Tercera where there are over 350 teams across 17 divisions.

The following season, they started on -6 points in essentially an amateur league often played on little better than park pitches. If, that was, they started at all. "It's over," one newspaper headline said. "All that's left is to sign the death certificate," said the city mayor, Gabino de Lorenzo; worse, he was keen to do just that, seeing a political battle to be won.

"Given the imminent disappearance of professional football in the city," as Gabino's administration put it, the council invited a local amateur club called Astur to take Oviedo's place. Astur changed their name to Oviedo ACF, their colours to Oviedo's colours, their badge to something near identical to Oviedo's. They even signed Berto, Oviedo's record appearance maker. The council promised them a subsidy and the Tartiere, pushing local media to back the project and Oviedo deeper into the grave.

But in doing so, Gabino started a war that Oviedo's supporters were willing to wage. It was an uneven fight but it was for survival and they would go tooth and nail, handed a cause to defend, an enemy to take on, and the anger to fuel them.

Astur were the clone, they were *Real* Oviedo, and there was a reawakening, a rebellion. The club, which had lost its entire first team and six of its 40 members of staff, started virtually from scratch, with no money, every cent they could find from somewhere embargoed. If there is an image to sum it up, it might be the coach's office set up next to a urinal because it was one of the few rooms in the stadium with natural light after the electricity had been cut off.

**In the promotion celebrations, Santi Cazorla took the microphone and told fans: "Without you, Oviedo doesn't exist," and he meant it**

Volunteering fans were at the heart of the revival, under the guidance of club president Manuel Lafuente who defied the mayor. They cleaned, fixed, painted; they called season-ticket holders one by one telling them that, yes, there will be a team this season. It would be built from the kids in the academy and anyone else they could get on board in the fortnight before the season started. They produced homemade membership cards, eventually issuing 11,700 of them, and followed their team to muddy pitches and grounds that could not hold them. Oviedo refused to die. Defeated, the city council eventually dropped Astur.

Yet no sooner had that battle been won, another began. A new owner arrived in 2006, a "saviour" who spent wildly, dragged them deeper into crisis and ended up disappearing. Down in Segunda B and left on the verge of folding in 2012, an interim board of fans – heroes all – had a plan. Desperate, they launched a share issue. In two weeks, they had to find at least €1.9m to avoid going out of business. Again supporters rose, queues to buy shares going round the stadium; this time they were backed by football fans from all around the world. An SOS went out. 36,962 people in 86 countries bought shares.

In the middle of that process,

**Back in La Liga... fans celebrate on the pitch after securing promotion last season**

Yesteryear...Real Oviedo take on Real Madrid at the Carlos Tartiere back in 2001

Oviedo played Madrid C in front of 20,500 fans in what might have been their last-ever game. The visiting players bought shares, Real Madrid underwrote €100,000 worth. Short-term survival was close, the world uniting to save the club. Watching the phenomenon spread, Arturo Elias convinced his father-in-law, the Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim, that this was special and he should become part of it. Oviedo were taken over the threshold, their future secured, debts eventually cleared. In 2022, the Pachuca group came on board.

On June 21, 2025, having twice had to climb out of Tercera and into Segunda B, having taken a decade to get into Segunda, they beat Mirandes in the play-off final to reach La Liga 24 years after going down. The sun finally came out again, just in time for their centenary. "We painted hell blue," as one banner puts it.

One of the men who scored in the final was 40-year-old Santi Cazorla who, at 18 and yet to play a first team game, had been forced out by the crisis in 2003. He had returned at 38, in the second division and on the minimum wage. Now, at 40, he had helped take them to La Liga, just as goalkeeper Esteban, relegated in 2001, had renounced a first division contract and returned to lift them from Segunda B to Segunda in 2015. A double European champion, Cazorla described it as the best moment of his career. In the celebrations, he took the microphone and told fans: "Without you, Oviedo doesn't exist," and he meant it.

The coach, Veljko Paunovic, had been in the team that went down in 2001. That day he sent a picture to his team-mates. "All of those that appear in that photo wanted this redemption, for the cycle to close. This is repaying a debt," he said. "Oviedo are back where they should have been all this time. And I think too of those who didn't make it."

Now here they were watching Elena and Carlos kick off, symbols of a generation that finally had. There was an ovation, a minute's silence for all those who had passed away since 2001, and then noise. So much noise. "My players were like: 'Oof, what an atmosphere;'" Xabi Alonso said afterwards. "Spectacular," he called it.

A huge Tifo hung over the north stand: "Oviedo, since 1926: reject imitations," it read. There was symbolism there too, an expression of who they are: the message had been the same on that first game in Tercera, 22 years earlier.

Back then, Oviedo won 1-0 against tiny CD Mosconia, Kily Alvarez's goal in August 2003 perhaps the most meaningful they ever scored. This time, against the biggest club of all, Oviedo lost 3-0. But they have won something more: a cause, an identity, a being, the Tartiere's first grand night in a generation serving as a symbol of survival, of overcoming, never abandoning. There is life and they sing songs from the third division and the fight for the future. Just one familiar tune is not sung, finally left behind after 24 years and the summer when Elena and Carlos were born. "We'll be back", it runs – and now they are.

Oviedo legend... Santi Cazorla

# eyewitness

Josh Butler reports

NORWAY

## Arctic Circle Derby

### The clash between Bodo/Glimt and Tromso is a story of exclusion, isolation and a fierce football rivalry

The small Arctic town of Bodo has become accustomed to hosting football teams from around Europe. Home to four-time Eliteserien champions Bodo/Glimt, who in 2025 became the first Norwegian team to reach a major European competition semi-final, this quiet settlement admired by hikers and adventurers has welcomed the likes of Arsenal, Roma and Ajax in recent years.

Yet for all the prestigious clubs that have taken to the artificial turf of the Aspmyra Stadion, the visit of northern rivals Tromso precipitates a reaction like no other. As Robin Gundersen, lifelong Glimt fan and resident artist in the town puts it: "Seeing all these huge teams come to little Bodo is amazing but, of all of them, I like least to lose to Tromso."

It is a rivalry as curious as it is passionately contested, with the two clubs lying some 300 miles apart, such is the vastness of the Norwegian north. Most supporters from Tromso fly in for this most recent derby in early August, but a hardy band – comprised almost entirely of members of the official supporter group Forza Tromso – have made the arduous journey by coach.

A ten-hour slog along the fjord-scarred coast, with little else but the shadows of the mountains for company, it is not for the faint of heart. "There is no direct road from Tromso to Bodo," Hakon Danielsen tells *World Soccer*. "We drive right through the night and then halfway we have to get a ferry." With a tired grin, he flashes his smart watch that indicates the amount of sleep he got on the journey. It blinks feebly: "0 hours".

Upon their arrival in Bodo, the away supporters are immediately reminded they are in enemy territory. The town centre is dominated by a series of multi-storey apartment blocks, stark against a blissfully clear Arctic sky, and hung on the balconies from the first floor to the tenth are dozens of yellow Bodo/Glimt flags. There is even one planted at the summit of the nearby Keiservarden, a mountainous viewpoint on the outskirts of the town popular with hikers.

Coincidentally, an arts and music festival is in full swing, and most attendees are clad in the bright yellow of Bodo/Glimt. The sports bar in the centre of town has erected a large screen and a party atmosphere is building. The Bodo players, who have breakfasted at the local Scandic Bodo Hotel, amble into the streets and pose for the occasional photograph. Such is the small size of the town, supporters and players rub shoulders with the kind of ease alien to Premier League football.

Over at Hundholmen Brygghus, the bar that has been assigned to the Tromso supporters, the owner has hung up two of his own flags above the door. With the away fans refusing to step foot in the premises, an argument soon breaks out between both parties. Following considerable deliberation, the proprietor bashfully removes the flags, and the TIL supporters flock to the bar.

This idea of the rivalry having an element of fun to it has diminished over the years; the success enjoyed by Bodo has intensified hostilities, especially among younger ▸

**Arctic Circle Derby...players of Bodo/Glimt and Tromso compete for the ball**
*Credit: Bodo/Glimt*

supporters. In recent seasons, they have witnessed Tromso's manager Gaute Helstrup, the club's best defender Jostein Gundersen, as well as homegrown talents like Runar Espejord, Daniel Bassi and August Mikkelsen (who has since returned) all depart for Bodo to near-universal outrage.

As Tromso captain Ruben Yttergard Jenssen succinctly puts it: "I don't like it. What if, say, Roy Keane moved from Manchester United to City? How would people feel? It's not right at all."

During the 2024 fixture at the Romssa Arena, *Felt L*, the terrace occupied by Tromso's hardcore supporters, was entirely obscured for part of the game by an enormous banner depicting these defectors in prison uniform awaiting the guillotine.

But there are a few players who can get away with swapping colours. One who managed it successfully is Thomas Drage, an important fixture in Tromso's most successful era to date who later spent two seasons with Glimt. He believes he was fortunate to play for both clubs in a time when the hostilities were not so fierce.

"The rivalry has developed significantly over the last few years," he tells *World Soccer*. "Ten years ago, you could get tickets any time; now you have to be early if you want to see the match. The supporter clubs of both teams have also made tremendous strides in recent years."

The huge growth of supporter clubs like Forza Tromso and J-Feltet can be attributed to the tireless volunteers that organise away trips, mobilise supporters into *corteos* (when fans descend upon the ground in a procession) and help produce matchday tifos.

When Morten Killinberg, now employed directly by the club as a supporter liaison officer, founded Forza Tromso in 2013, competition was non-existent. While Tromso were recording three consecutive top-four finishes, Glimt were coming to the end of a four-year stay in the second tier. In fact, since the professionalisation of the league in 1991, the two clubs had only spent 13 seasons in the same division.

Frank Amundsen, one of the co-hosts of the highly popular *Rabona* podcast has been behind much of the growth

**Home support... Bodo/Glimt fans wave their scarves**
*Credit: Bodo/Glimt*

***Corteo*...a procession of Tromso fans ahead of last year's derby**
*Credit: Alamy*

associated with Bodo's supporter boom. Famed for their tifos – from Boo the Ghost hunting a hapless Lazio-clad Luigi to a horde of Minions – J-Feltet are at the forefront of the Bodo supporter movement, spearheading the 6,000-plus that constituted the largest away following at Old Trafford in history.

His opposite number, Morten, is unable to make the trip to Bodo, and so his role is occupied on this occasion by Ronny Andersen, who cuts a quiet figure amidst the pre-match raucousness of Hundholmen. At 5:30pm, 90 minutes before kick-off, the supporters empty into the streets to begin the *corteo*. Led by a brace of capos and ably assisted by eager drummers, this feverish parade, several hundred strong, marches a little over a mile to the Aspmyra Stadion.

The closer to the front, the more hardcore the fan. These primarily young men clutch a hand-painted banner long enough to span the width of the road and are soon lost in the shroud of red flare smoke. As the *corteo* approaches the stadium, it passes through pockets of home supporters. Most are cordial, some even impressed by the spectacle. There is little sense of threat. But as the away fans file into the ground, home supporters jeer from the concourses above, and a few resort to obscene gestures. The carnival atmosphere that had been present in the town is starting to ebb away, replaced by something more febrile.

When the game kicks off, both sets of supporters unveil their respective tifos: Glimt's is a striking 20-foot rendition of forward Kasper Hogh performing his signature celebration; Tromso's a stirring display that spells out "Tromso Idrettslag: Clothed in red and white".

Everyone involved with Forza Tromso has a job. Those who have organised the tifo now hand responsibility to the capos. Situated at the forefront, these conductors – Petter Jensen chief among them – lead off on each song with the aid of megaphones, urging the crowd to maintain a near-constant barrage of noise.

"You are not here to experience the atmosphere; you are here to create it," goes the edict issued by Forza Tromso.

And it is noticed and appreciated by everyone, not least of all the players themselves.

> "You are not here to experience the atmosphere; you are here to create it"
>
> **Fan group Forza Tromso**

"The fans help a lot," wing-back and Norway Under-21 international Runar Norheim tells *World Soccer*. "I watch the tifos, and they make me laugh. Honestly, they're so funny. During the games, I listen to the songs when there's a break. They never stop singing, even when we aren't playing well."

Born in Finnsnes, a town located a few miles down the coast from Tromso, Norheim is as red and white as they come, having played for the club from 2020 to 2025 before sealing a move to Danish outfit Nordsjaelland this summer. For him, there is no bigger game than against Bodo.

"It's the game you want to play all season. We are two top teams now and the games have a life of their own. Even when we are losing games, we look at the calendar and we know we can beat Bodo."

In the end, the spoils are shared. A Kasper Hogh penalty is cancelled out by Ieltsin Camoes, but it is the Tromso fans that appear the more jubilant. As they depart the ground for their coach back north, they are still singing as the Bodo supporters file homeward in the Arctic twilight.

In a sense, the sharing of the spoils is just. Though they are divided by 300 miles, the two towns and people of Bodo and Tromso share a common identity. They are North Norwegians, a people historically maligned by the south, and who have spent decades striving for equality. Before 1972, teams from the north weren't even allowed to compete in the Norwegian top flight. The fact that two of the top teams in Norway come from the north is some vindication for the years of discrimination.

"Not all that long ago people from the north were not allowed to work or own houses in the south," Rudi Gundersen laments. "The discrimination was very real, and though it has got better, I am glad we can enjoy this success." Then, almost as an afterthought, he adds: "Well, Bodo's success. Hate is a strong word – I don't think I hate Tromso – but I certainly don't want them to win anything!"

And that defines the curious relationship between Bodo and Tromso. Though they are loath to admit it, they are united by their shared experiences as northerners in Norway. But when it comes to the football, you are one side or the other. *Bodovœring* or *Tromsovœring*. Yellow, or red and white. There is precious little middle ground.

**Trademark celebration...Kasper Hogh after scoring against Tromso**
*Credit: Bodo/Glimt*

International FOCUS

# NORWAY

**It has been a quarter of a century since Norway last appeared at a major international tournament, but their fleet of top-class forwards are leading them out of the footballing wilderness, writes Josh Butler**

In February, Norway and Manchester City striker Erling Haaland got involved in promoting a new line of Oasis merchandise ahead of the band's long-awaited return. As the summer began, and nineties nostalgia gripped the UK, it was not just Mancunians in bucket hats that were dreaming of recreating the events of 30 years ago. In June, Haaland was on the scoresheet as Norway thumped Italy 3-0 in a World Cup qualifier to give them a golden opportunity of reaching the global finals for the first time since 1998.

The 1990s was a special decade for Norwegian football. Coached by Egil Olsen and subsequently his tactical

**On the rise... Norway's players ahead of a 2026 World Cup qualifier**

Norway's record goalscorer...Haaland already has over 40 international goals

disciple Nils Johan Semb, the national team rose to an all-time high of second in the FIFA world rankings in 1995, with the on-field peak coming at the 1998 World Cup when they beat Brazil 2-1. Indeed, Norway are one of the few nations to have never lost to the *Selecao* in their history.

As a footballing nation, Norway became famed for their athleticism and directness. Their players were big, strong and disciplined. "*A være best uten ball*" ("to be the best without the ball") was Olsen's philosophy. But those halcyon days are but a distant memory now. The Premier League stalwarts that formed the formidable back-line – Ronny Johnsen, Henning Berg, Stig Inge Bjornebye and Gunnar Halle – are long retired.

In the two decades following their Euro 2000 group-stage exit, the Norwegian FA (NFF) have tried just about everything to return the country to an international tournament. They've been through six managers to varying degrees of success, and attempted to adopt several philosophies of the zeitgeist from *tiki-taka* to high pressing.

In the last ten years though, the NFF has sought to make use of the most powerful tool at its disposal: money. Norway is a tremendously wealthy country and, when it comes to sport, the country has learned how to spend effectively.

Rather than directing finances towards the elite end of the game, grassroots footballing facilities have instead witnessed enormous levels of development. There are now more than 1,000 artificial football pitches in the country, and this proliferation of all-weather surfaces has been a significant factor in contributing to youth development, allowing academies to train their squads even during the harsh winters.

The other defining tool in the forging of Norway's new golden generation concerns the social factor of sport. The Norwegian approach to sport is one of patience, community and fun; as of 2024, 93 per cent of children and teenagers participated in at least one sport. The maintenance of league tables is banned in the children's game in order to promote playing for enjoyment, while the somewhat British mentality of picking a sport and dedicating your life to it is almost unheard of. Children, particularly

Statement win... Alexander Sorloth scores against Italy in June's World Cup qualifier

Legendary striker ...Tore Andre Flo celebrates after scoring in the win over Brazil in 1998

Lethal strike pairing... Haaland and Sorloth

those from middle-class backgrounds whose parents can afford entry into the best academies, are encouraged to pursue interests across a broad range of activities. Haaland, for example, participated in athletics and handball, Jorgen Strand Larsen played ice hockey, and midfielder Sander Berge was a talented basketball player.

Through providing efficient, targeted funding and a holistic environment, Norway is once again producing elite footballers. Except this time there's one noticeable difference: while the Norwegian teams of the 1990s were built on their defence, the Norway of today runs a conveyor belt of forwards.

Between them, the three senior national team strikers, Haaland, Strand Larsen and Alexander Sorloth, scored 119 goals in top European leagues in the previous two seasons. For context, that's more than all seven of the Spain forwards called up by Luis de la Fuente in September put together.

Part of the success of these three strikers is due to the return to prominence of the monster centre-forward. These days, bigger is better up front – the average

The 1990s was a special decade for Norwegian football, with the on-field peak coming at the 1998 World Cup when they beat Brazil 2-1

**BELOW:** Peak years ...Norway players celebrate with their fans at France '98

height of the starting Premier League forward now stands at 189cm – and Norwegians are bigger than most.

Not that Haaland, Sorloth and Strand Larsen are carbon copies of one another. Despite all three standing well over 190cm, there are subtleties to their games. Haaland is a prolific runner and elite finisher. At Borussia Dortmund, his monstrous pace was perfect for expediting counter-attacks against defences that had pushed too far upfield; under Pep Guardiola at Manchester City, he has become a world-class penalty-box poacher.

Sorloth, on the other hand, has spent much of his career as the support act, utilising his huge frame to assert aerial superiority and function as an archetypal target man. In recent years, he has added goals to his game. In the last two seasons, at Villarreal and then Atletico Madrid, he scored 43 goals in La Liga, even without being a regular starter for Diego Simeone's side. During that time, only Barcelona striker Robert Lewandowski scored more times in the Spanish top flight.

Strand Larsen, five months older than Haaland yet still the junior partner of the trio, occupies the middle ground. Not quite as quick as Haaland and not quite as strong as Sorloth, he is a perennial 18-yard box merchant. His debut campaign in the Premier League saw him net 14 goals for a struggling Wolverhampton Wanderers side thanks to his crisp movement, diligence and ability to run across defenders.

Probing deeper, Haaland, Sorloth and Strand Larsen all share similar backgrounds that have contributed to their successes in the game. Famously, Erling is the son of Alf-Inge Haaland, a former professional footballer, and heptathlete Gry Marita Braut, but Sorloth is also well known in his home country as the son of former national team player, striker Goran Sorloth. Both of Strand Larsen's parents were accomplished strikers too: his father, Atle, is the record scorer for Tistedalens TIF and his mother, Vibeke, the top scorer for Kvik Women.

These players have been bred for success, and the result is a depth of attacking talent that Norway has not seen since Euro 2000. The squad that travelled to the Netherlands and Belgium featured four players that are still among their all-time top ten goalscorers – Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, Tore Andre Flo, Steffen Iversen and a young John Carew – yet they crashed out at the group stage with only one goal scored (see right).

Unlike at Euro 2000, current coach Stale Solbakken has found a system that works for his strikers. Haaland operates as the indisputable number nine, with exciting young RB Leipzig winger Antonio Nusa on the left flank, and Sorloth slotting in wherever he's needed. At times he has occupied the right flank as a kind of false winger, given licence to drift infield or operate as a wide target man, while against weaker sides he plays directly alongside Haaland in a 4-4-2. As for Strand Larsen, he is firmly the back up: only seven of his 21 caps have come in the starting XI and four of those in friendlies.

Now Norway's record scorer, Haaland long surpassed all four of those Euro 2000 forwards and has racked up 48 goals in just 45 caps following his five-goal blitz against Moldova in September, while Sorloth already has 24, level with Carew, placing him joint-fifth in their all-time scoring charts. However, the duo must deliver at a major tournament to truly match the exploits of Solskjaer and Flo. They have an advantage over their predecessors in that there is more creativity around them, with captain Martin Odegaard in behind, Nusa to the left, and starlet Oscar Bobb, Benfica's Andreas Schjelderup and teenage talent Sverre Nypan (more on page 44) waiting in the wings.

Most of them weren't even born the last time Norway played at a major international tournament. For Haaland and Co., qualifying for the World Cup in North America next year is not about nostalgia, it's about making their own history.

**Brilliant back-up...Wolves' Jorgen Strand Larsen**

## EURO 2000

**False dawn...Steffen Iversen celebrates scoring the winner v Spain**

While younger Norway fans will rightly be excited by the current crop, those with longer memories will recall the ill-fated Euro 2000 campaign, when they were also blessed with a hugely talented crop of forwards.

Head coach Nils Johan Semb included three established Premier League strikers in his squad with Ole Gunnar Solskjaer (Manchester United), Tore Andre Flo (Chelsea) and Steffen Iversen (Tottenham Hotspur) travelling to Belgium and the Netherlands, as well as emerging starlet John Carew, then on the verge of joining Valencia from Rosenborg.

It was undoubtedly Norway's best forward line-up for a generation – Flo had proven to be a reliable goalscorer for Chelsea, Iversen was coming off the back of a career-high 17-goal campaign for Spurs, and Solskjaer was one of the most clinical finishers in the English game – and the signs were promising when they were all involved in a 1-0 win over Spain in the first game of the tournament.

Iversen, starting on the right of a front three alongside Flo and Solskjaer, headed home the winner. Yet that proved to be Norway's only goal of the tournament – or indeed any other tournament this century. After a 1-0 defeat to FR Yugoslavia, they played Slovenia in the decisive final game, and could only draw 0-0.

Afterwards, supporters and pundits lamented the team's ultra-defensive and over-cautious approach. But that wasn't wholly true – after all, all four of the forwards started against Slovenia, with Flo and Carew up front and Solskjaer and Iversen on the wings – yet the team were painfully lacking imagination. To have collected maximum points against the group's top seeds in the first game and yet still fail to progress was viewed as an abject failure, and a dreadful waste of Norway's attacking talent.

Semb's modern successor, Stale Solbakken, was on the pitch that day. Norwegians will be hoping that if they do get to the 2026 World Cup, he will have learned from those past mistakes.

# CLEVER SVERRE

Before joining Manchester City, Norway's latest young star Sverre Nypan spoke with *World Soccer*

**Words:** Josh Butler

In recent years, Norwegians have got used to seeing their country produce elite-level footballers. Erling Haaland, Martin Odegaard, Alexander Sorloth, Oscar Bobb, Jorgen Strand Larsen and Antonio Nusa are all excelling at major European clubs, and soon there could be another name to add to that list: Sverre Nypan.

After becoming both the youngest debutant and goalscorer in Rosenborg's history, establishing himself as an integral component of his hometown club's midfield, the 18-year-old starlet had a queue of scouts wanting to see him in action. Finally, after months of speculation, he signed for Manchester City in July before quickly being sent out on loan to Middlesbrough.

Having made his top-flight debut at the age of 15 in 2022, his rise has been compared to that of Odegaard's, who sparked a Europe-wide scramble for his signature after emerging at a similar age for Stromsgodset in 2014.

"It's a positive," Nypan tells *World Soccer* when asked how he handles all the attention. "It comes with a little bit of pressure, and that's natural. Pressure is a privilege, you know? It means that you have done something right. It would be worse if you didn't have any pressure, and nobody expected anything from you."

It's a mature answer from a footballer so young. But then again, he has had to grow up quickly since becoming a first-team player at Norway's most successful club while still in school.

Keeping him grounded have been a number of ex-Norway internationals that he has played alongside, such as Per Ciljan Skjelbred, Markus Henriksen and Rosenborg captain Ole Selnaes.

"These are big players, big names that have helped me a lot in my position as a midfielder and that I can come and talk to."

Although his career is only just beginning, Nypan holds himself to high standards – both in training and on matchdays. After first establishing himself in the first team in the 2023 season, he started the following campaign slowly, scoring just once in the first 12 matches. But by the second half of the season he was back to justifying the early hype. Between August and November, he scored seven times, including a hat-trick at home to Lillestrom, and his form helped Rosenborg rise from tenth to eventually finish fourth. In both of those two seasons, he was named the Eliteserien Young Player of the Year.

"It's hard to recreate the form of your first season. Constantly performing at the highest level is tough," he admits. "I did not start the [2024] season that well, but I got back up on the horse, as we say in Norway. I got back on track and performed as I should. I am really proud of how I turned that around.

"It's not easy to be promoted to a first team when you're 14 and then get your first contract when you're 15, but they took me on board really well, and it wasn't long before I felt like this is

**Massive talent... Nypan at loan club Middlesbrough**
*Credit: Alamy*

Norway youngster...Nypan faces the Republic of Ireland in an U21 Euros qualifier in October 2024

the team that I belonged to."

His humility is matched by his hunger for the game, the desire to learn and absorb as much information as possible from those who have already been there and done it. One of his coaches at Rosenborg was the former Norway midfielder Alexander Tettey, who provided plenty of guidance for Nypan.

"If you have questions about how to perform in midfield then you just ask him," Nypan says.

Tettey won 34 caps for Norway and enjoyed a distinguished nine-year career with Norwich City, including four seasons in the English Premier League. While the former Canary was regarded for his ability to break up play, Nypan is more expansive, capable of playing a variety of roles in the middle of the park.

When asked about his favourite role, he says: "I usually like to be controlling the game and being on the ball a lot. But I like being in both boxes, so I can help with the defence and I can help creating and scoring goals."

In April, he scored his 14th, and final, Eliteserien goal. But he is more than an attacking midfielder, and he values his work off the ball as much as on it.

"My intelligence on the pitch is what people say is my strength," he reflects. "I'm not the fastest, but I'm not slow either, and my physique is okay. But my head is what makes me special."

In speaking he is thoughtful and articulate, and it is much the same story on the pitch. He expresses himself through an array of touches, each one carefully selected for the scenario at hand. His ability to find space, to think faster and more creatively than others, belies his youth.

> "My intelligence on the pitch is what people say is my strength...my head is what makes me special"
>
> **Nypan reflects on his strengths**

In recent years, Norway has been shedding its reputation for producing sturdy, dependable and athletic footballers – the kind of players that flocked to England in the early years of the Premier League era. Much of that is owed to the sizeable investment in youth infrastructure, including the proliferation of all-weather pitches that have allowed youngsters to practise their technical skills throughout the year from an early age, even when the tough Norwegian winter sets in (more on page 40).

For Sverre, it is a journey that began early in his childhood. "I actually wasn't the most excited about playing football at first," he admits with a laugh. "But then I started training even more, and I started performing better. And when you're good at something, it's fun. So that's what happened when I was six or seven – I started to be better than the rest."

It didn't take long before he realised that a career in football was indeed a realistic option. Playing in the youth ranks of Trondheim-based Nardo FK before switching to Rosenborg in 2020, Nypan travelled abroad to play in tournaments against some of Europe's biggest clubs.

"We actually beat some of them – then you really feel that you have something special," he recalls. "I remember I played against Ethan Nwaneri from England [and Arsenal]. He was really good, even though we

English second tier this year. Ipswich Town paid Danish side Nordsjaelland £17.5m for forward Sindre Walle Egeli, making him the latest Norwegian after Sondre Langas, Lars-Jorgen Salvesen (both Derby County), Egil Selvik (Watford) and Aune Heggebo (West Bromwich Albion) to join the league in 2025.

Leaving home will bring challenges for Nypan, who has supported Rosenborg since he was a child and lived just five minutes from their Lerkendal Stadion.

In an ideal world, he might have left the 26-time champions at the end of the year as they looked to end their seven-year wait for the title. But that wasn't the case, and the early signs are that he has settled quickly into English football. In the same week the Trondheim club were knocked out of Conference League qualifying by German side Mainz, Nypan got his first taste of English football, coming off the bench for the last 18 minutes of a 2-1 win over Norwich City. A week later he played the entire second half as Boro, the Championship's early pacesetters, beat Sheffield United 1-0.

After the game, his new manager Rob Edwards was full of praise, particularly complimenting Nypan for celebrating a block inside his own box.

"That's an 18-year-old lad who is quite a flairy player. But to then be celebrating blocks...he's got used to England already!"

**Rising star...Nypan clashes with Brazilian midfielder Casemiro during a friendly against Manchester United last summer**

won. And I played against [Barcelona and Spain winger] Lamine Yamal. He is obviously a great player. It was a long time ago, but it's cool to have played against players like that."

Back in January, it looked like Nwaneri would become a team-mate of Nypan's, with Arsenal reportedly leading the race to sign him. Aston Villa then joined the Gunners in the chase, but ultimately Manchester City saw off the competition, agreeing a fee of £12.5 milion with Rosenborg to sign the teenager in July.

Yet even while that deal was being finalised, it was clear that Nypan would not agree to any move that would leave him sitting on the bench. Within a month, he had joined Championship side Middlesbrough on loan for the season.

"When City came, it was a really nice plan," he said at his unveiling on Teesside. "Of course, getting into the first team there is really, really difficult, so you need to play games when you're my age...That's why I think a loan to Middlesbrough is really nice, so I can get used to English football."

Moving to England, he hopes, will also enhance his reputation with the national selectors. He has played for Norway at every youth level, scoring his first goal for the Under-21s in a friendly win against Denmark in September, but is still waiting for his first senior call-up.

Norway boss Stale Solbakken is likely to take in a few Championship matches this season, after a flurry of his players made switches to the

**Boyhood club...Nypan is Rosenborg through and through** *Credit: Alamy*

# LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

## Footballers following in their fathers' footsteps is becoming a growing trend

**Words:** Ryan Baldi

In the pantheon of professional football, dynasties aren't confined to national teams or storied club legacies. They appear on the pitch, generation after generation, as children of ex-players following in the footsteps of their fathers.

According to football data website *Transfermarkt*, there have been 46 fathers and sons to have appeared for Premier League clubs since the league's inception in 1992, a striking indicator that the game's next generation is increasingly shaped not just by raw talent but by inherited legacy.

Perhaps the most famous current example is Erling Haaland, the Norwegian powerhouse currently spearheading Manchester City's attack. His father, Alf-Inge Haaland, was a rugged Premier League midfielder who amassed over 200 appearances for Nottingham Forest, Leeds United and Manchester City from 1993 to 2003. Erling, still just 25, has already eclipsed his father's achievements, having stormed the English top flight

in the 2022-23 season with 52 goals across all competitions and playing a central role in City's historic treble.

Another notable figure is Borussia Monchengladbach's Giovanni Reyna, the American attacking midfielder whose father, Claudio, enjoyed a strong career in the Premier League with Sunderland and Manchester City. Gio's breakthrough came at Borussia Dortmund, but his 2024 loan move to Nottingham Forest brought his story full circle, placing him on English soil just as his father once was.

Similarly, Justin Kluivert, son of Dutch legend Patrick Kluivert, has carved out a respectable career since coming through Ajax's esteemed academy and now finds himself with Bournemouth in the Premier League.

These aren't isolated narratives. West Ham United's Freddie Potts, son of former Hammers right-back Steve, and Leeds United left-back Gabriel Gudmundsson, whose father Niklas played for Blackburn Rovers in the 1990s, became the latest players to join the list at the start of this season.

Many of the father-son pairings have seen the younger generation reach and remain at either Premier League or Championship level in 2025. From Watford winger Tom Ince, son of Paul, to new Chelsea star Liam Delap, whose father Rory is remembered for his long throw-ins at Stoke City, this trend signals a broader movement.

Most of these players have graduated from elite academy systems and continue to compete in the upper tiers of English football. The evidence suggests that football's modern ecosystem is not only accommodating these legacy players but perhaps actively favouring them.

There are clear advantages to being the child of a former professional footballer. Name recognition alone can elevate a young player's profile. Coaches, scouts and club executives are more likely to take a second look at a youth prospect if his surname is already etched into Premier League lore. The attention may not always be positive, but it can accelerate access to opportunities that others must wait years to attain.

"The fact that I played definitely is a good thing to help him on his journey"

Paul Furlong on his son Darnell

The Furlongs ...both Darnell and Paul played for QPR

"I scout a player on his merits," says Martin Taylor, an experienced scout who's worked for Chelsea, Arsenal and Tottenham Hotspur. "I don't care who his dad was. If he's good enough, he's good enough. But I think there are opportunities given to these kids because of who their fathers are.

"There are a lot of players where the sons try to reach their dads' level, but they can't. Is it the right thing? I don't think it is, because they're not doing the kid any favours."

Financial means also play a crucial role. Wealthy ex-professionals can provide their children with access

The Youngs... Ashley Young and his son Tyler both joined Ipswich Town this year

The Haalands... Erling Haaland and his dad Alf-Inge with the Premier League trophy

to private coaching, specialised nutrition plans and even elaborate backyard training facilities that simulate professional environments. This head start can translate into a tactical understanding and physical conditioning that far exceeds peers of the same age.

There is also the intangible benefit of mentorship. The sons of footballers are raised with a unique insight into the demands of the game, both on and off the pitch.

"I know at any given time what he's feeling," says Paul Furlong, the former Chelsea, Birmingham City and Queens Park Rangers striker whose son, Darnell, broke through at QPR and went on to play more than 200 games for West Bromwich Albion in the Premier League and Championship before joining Ipswich Town this summer.

"There can be moments on the pitch where I can see a ball being played into him – I know the feeling. And I know the feeling when things don't go well. I'm definitely able to help him with that and keep him on the straight and narrow. The fact that I played definitely is a good thing to help him on his journey. Even now, we still have conversations."

"I try to be there as a father to support," adds Lee Clark, who starred for Newcastle United, Sunderland and Fulham during his playing days and whose youngest son, Bobby, now on loan in the Championship at Derby County, won the League Cup with Liverpool before joining Red Bull Salzburg in 2024. "You try not to get involved too much but it is difficult. He's my son. I love him so much. If I think things aren't going well for him, I'll try and protect him.

"You do say that you just want to be the father, the parent, and watch from afar. But when things are a little bit difficult, you want to be there and try and help him that little bit more. It's a fine line.

"Ultimately, he's got the talent. But he's picked up what the game means, how important it is to people, being in a household that was football-orientated for all of his childhood. I would imagine those type of things can't do any harm and can only help him when he steps out on the pitch to get an understanding of what's at stake."

It could be argued that successful sons of former players benefit greatly from the "Matthew effect". Taking its name from the Parable of the Talents in the biblical Gospel of Matthew and also sometimes referred to as "cumulative advantage", this is the notion that initial advantages tend to lead to greater advantages over time, while disadvantages tend to widen – the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

But while the road to a career in the game might be less obstructed for these second-generation players than it is for others, it is not entirely without pitfalls. A famous surname can be as much a burden as it is a boon. Expectations are immediately sky-high. Every performance is judged not only on its own merit but also against the backdrop of a father's career.

A prime example of the elevated profile and outsized expectations young footballers with famous fathers can face is that of Kai Rooney. Videos of Wayne's 15-year-old son dazzling for Manchester United's youth teams regularly circulate on social media and comparisons to his dad are inescapable. But when your dad is a former England captain and the all-time leading scorer for the club you represent, that's an absurdly high bar for a young person to attempt to vault.

"In the case of Wayne's lad, I think he handles it all quite well because he's quite bright," says former United youth coach Tony Whelan, who worked with the children of the likes of Ryan Giggs, Nicky Butt and Michael Carrick – as well as Rooney – during his more than three decades as one of the most influential figures at the Carrington academy.

"Wayne would come and watch his lad and stand alone, a long way away. He'd never scream or shout or anything like that. And you have parents' meetings with them, and you don't speak to them any differently to any other parent. It's down to the personality of the young player concerned and the parents.

"Most of them, in my experience, have dealt with it very well. You're inevitably going to get the odd jibe, the gossip. They must get that. It's inevitable. But all the players who've worked under me who had parents who were footballers have all been really good kids and have coped with it really well. I've had admiration for them. If it was me, I would be thinking, 'Well, Dad, I'd rather go somewhere else, where you're not there and I can just go and get on with it.' I'd be thinking about where I could escape to."

"At the outset, there was no pressure," Furlong explains of his son Darnell's early career. "We could see no pressure. My wife, my friends that used to come and watch him play could see no pressure. But last Christmas we spoke about that and he said he felt pressure. But the way that he dealt with it was in the correct manner. Some people, the pressure can show. With him, you couldn't see it."

**The Delaps...Rory (above) made 322 Premier League appearances, while his son Liam (top) joined Chelsea for £30m this summer**

One might assume that the biggest leg-up the offspring of former players receive is in their genetics, with the son inheriting the attributes that led the father to a successful career at the top end of the game. But genetic inheritance, it turns out, is not so straightforward. How much aptitude for elite-level football is passed down the generations depends greatly on what type of player the parent was and what type of player the child hopes to become.

"There's not one trait that's been looked at so far that hasn't some genetic association," explains Dr Alex McAuley, a postdoctoral research fellow in the Research for Athlete and Youth Sport Development Lab at Birmingham City University. "However, there isn't one trait that is 100 per cent genetic, either.

"Height is the big one, at 80 per cent heritable. Physical traits like power and endurance, those are more like 60 to 70 per cent. But when we come to the more psychological traits, those are

more like 40 per cent, 30 per cent in some cases. And the science around heritability percentages can change depending on environment.

"From the genetics side, it comes down to your conceptualisation of talent. For example, Peter Crouch, in another nation – say, Spain – he might not have had the typical profile [of a top footballer]. If Peter Crouch's son went in [to an academy], you could say, more likely than not, he'll end up being a similar height. But in a different culture – or if the criteria changed, like it has in England, to try and develop kids more like Phil Foden rather than the next Peter Crouch – that genetic advantage might not be there any more."

Still, looking at the numbers, the trend is undeniable. *Transfermarkt's* data confirms that, of the 46 fathers and sons who have played for Premier League clubs, many of the progeny continue to feature in English football at the highest levels. Most are academy graduates, having spent their formative years at clubs like Liverpool, Manchester City or United. Indeed, the Anfield club made headlines by winning the 2024 League Cup final with three sons of ex-players in Clark, Jayden Danns and Lewis Koumas. This suggests a pipeline not driven solely by coincidence, but by a deliberate and increasingly effective developmental model.

"I'd guess that if you looked at the representative norms of players who make it versus players who don't, those who make it and have got fathers who played at a high level would probably be over-represented in the pool of talent," says Prof. Adam L. Kelly, a professor of Sport and Exercise at Birmingham City University. "So there must be something there with regards to why they do make it."

In today's footballing landscape, lineage is becoming a valuable asset. Clubs understand the advantages of recruiting players who have grown up immersed in the culture and demands of elite competition. While the sport still thrives on discovering raw, unpolished talent in unlikely places, there is growing comfort in investing in players whose foundations are already solid.

What this means for the future is compelling. As football continues to globalise and the competition for academy spots intensifies, expect more sons of ex-professionals to emerge on the scene. Not because of nepotism – or, at least, not only because of nepotism – but because the environment they are raised in uniquely prepares them for the realities of the modern game.

> "Wayne [Rooney] would come and watch his lad and stand alone, a long way away. He'd never scream or shout or anything like that"
>
> **Former Manchester United youth coach Tony Whelan**

Ultimately, what distinguishes those who succeed is not the familiar name on the back of their shirt but their ability to manage the weight that comes with it.

The most successful of this new generation aren't just honouring their fathers; they are outstripping them and building legacies of their own. Their stories aren't just about continuity. They are about evolution, resilience and the enduring allure of what can be passed down from father to son.

**The Rooneys...Kai Rooney is now starring in the youth team of Manchester United, who his father, Wayne, scored a record 253 goals for during his illustrious playing career**

## Like father, like son

*The father-son duos to have played for Premier League clubs*

| FATHER & SON | COMBINED PL APPEARANCES |
|---|---|
| Peter Schmeichel & Kasper Schmeichel | 594 |
| Ian Wright & Shaun Wright-Phillips | 528 |
| Rory Delap & Liam Delap* | 401 |
| Paul Ince & Tom Ince | 354 |
| Alan Cork & Jack Cork | 350 |
| Robbie Savage & Charlie Savage | 346 |
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# CHAMPIONS LEAGUE 2025-26 *PREVIEW*

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# The Favourites

## LIVERPOOL

*The Reds' radical rebuild*

Heartfelt, appreciative memories of forward Diogo Jota will be front and centre as the Merseysiders aim for glory in UEFA's most important club competition. The Reds, winners of the European Cup/Champions League on six previous occasions, have a rich history of supremacy in this particular arena and dearly would love to pay the ultimate tribute to their fallen comrade with another glittering continental prize.

After securing their first Premier League crown in five years last term, Liverpool have taken the calculated risk of not merely tinkering with a successful formula but going all out, spending more than £400m on a raft of high-priced talent, including striker Alexander Isak from Newcastle United, gifted playmaker Florian Wirtz (Bayer Leverkusen) and France forward Hugo Ekitike (Eintracht Frankfurt). That means a huge amount of reconstructive surgery for manager Arne Slot, who will need all his psychological savvy and team-building acumen in his second season at the helm. Refreshing the ranks is one thing. This is a radical overhaul.

Big-money signing... Florian Wirtz

### Is Jeremie Frimpong a like-for-like replacement for Trent Alexander-Arnold at right-back?

Anything but. While Alexander-Arnold is essentially a playmaker, an outstanding passer and wonderful crosser, Frimpong is an express train wing-back both with and without the ball. Trent's playmaking from deep may be imitated by midfielder Dominik Szoboszlai, who has been used at right-back with some early success.

**COACH**
**Arne Slot**
One of only three Anfield bosses, with Joe Fagan and Kenny Dalglish, to have won the league title in his first season.

**KEY MAN**
**Florian Wirtz**
Not content to show his genius with the ball, the German also comes with a rare hunger and desire.

**YOUNGSTER**
**Rio Ngumoha**
Reds skipper Virgil van Dijk describes the 17-year-old as "special", an apt label for this effervescent and fearless winger.

### How will Slot's approach most differ compared to last season?

Expect Slot to rotate his first XI much more in 2025-26. For the most part, the Dutchman appeared not to trust his back-up crew last term, changing his starting line-up sparingly and inviting fatigue. He now has a roster of much greater depth and flexibility, a reservoir of options he will be happy to dip into.

### An Achilles heel or two?

Without doubt, this Liverpool side can be got at. Slot's predilection for throwing bodies forward can leave them exposed to a lightning counter-raid, while crosses have been their Kryptonite for at least a couple of seasons. Last term, for example, a quarter of the goals they conceded originated in that way.

## REAL MADRID

*Alonso back at the Bernabeu*

A new era is underway at the Bernabeu, where Xabi Alonso has returned to take over from Carlo Ancelotti. The former Bayer Leverkusen boss, who starred as a controlling midfielder for *Los Blancos* from 2009 to 2014, has two main objectives: snatch back La Liga from Barcelona and restore Madrid's Champions League lustre.

Vanquished by Arsenal in both legs of last season's quarter-final, Madrid looked unusually tired, dispirited and ineffectual, a far cry from the all-conquering side that has won no fewer than six Champions Leagues since 2014.

It might be unfair, but Alonso will be relentlessly compared to his predecessor who, in six seasons at the helm, scooped 15 trophies, including three Champions League crowns. Not that Alonso is likely to be swept away by the huge pressure at the Bernabeu. He will be the same cool customer he was at Leverkusen: the arch-competitor, a perfectionist with a plan and someone who relates to his players.

World-class talent....can Mbappe and Vinicius click?

### In which area must Alonso effect the most improvement?

Their pressing left much to be desired last season, with too many players doing their own thing. Alonso, who insists that his team is compact and aggressive, can be relied upon to bring more discipline, co-ordination and energy to the team's work against the ball.

**COACH**
**Xabi Alonso**
One of Europe's most exciting coaching talents, back at the club he won the Champions League with in 2014.

**KEY MAN**
**Kylian Mbappe**
Last season, his first in Real Madrid white, the France superstar certainly produced the goal numbers: 44 in 59 games.

**YOUNGSTER**
**Franco Mastantuono**
Argentine attacking prodigy, signed from River Plate this summer for €45m.

### Can Kylian Mbappe and Vinicius Junior co-exist in the same side?

The pair only rarely seemed to be on the same wavelength last season. Both are clearly world-class attacking talents, but they like to be their team's main man. Alonso must find a way to make them see the bigger picture, to work harder off the ball, to learn to dovetail and to occupy space better.

### How important is new €50m centre-back Dean Huijsen?

The Dutch-born Spain international is crucial to Xabi Alonso's plans. In the absence of a midfield string-puller such as Toni Kroos, the onus will be on Huijsen to use his exceptional technical qualities as the first port of call in starting moves. Big responsibility for a 20-year-old.

# PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN

*Holders prepared to defend their crown*

European winners...Ousmane Dembele lifts the UEFA Super Cup in August

**COACH**

**Luis Enrique**
Former marathon runner and Ironman competitor, whose team benefits from similar peak conditioning. Will face former club Barcelona in the league phase.

**KEY MAN**

**Ousmane Dembele**
The Frenchman has matured immensely over the past year. One of the most improved attackers in world football.

**YOUNGSTER**

**Senny Mayulu**
Local 19-year-old midfielder who came off the bench to score in last season's final. Played five times in the US at the Club World Cup.

Fourteen years after Qatari investors took over at PSG, they finally made it to the promised land, making their dreams come true last May with an emphatic 5-0 victory over Internazionale in the Champions League final.

Brilliantly coached by the Spaniard Luis Enrique, the man responsible for turning the Parisians from a disparate gaggle of superstars into a real team, PSG already have their eyes on the next prize: the creation of a European dynasty. Only eight clubs have won successive European Cup/Champions League titles and PSG chairman Nasser Al Khelaifi is determined to follow that lead.

"We're going to redouble our efforts in all spheres," he said. "We still have so much to accomplish."

According to Luis Enrique, the club will only repeat their success of last season if they continue to present their opponents with unpredictable problems. Enrique has hinted at making the sort of tactical changes that "take us out of our comfort zone". Some have suggested the coach is bluffing. We will see.

**What was the rationale behind replacing Gianluigi Donnarumma with Lucas Chevalier in goal?**
Luis Enrique sees Chevalier, a €40m summer signing from Lille, as a more modern goalkeeper, someone who is comfortable with the ball at his feet and better in his distribution. Donnarumma is a wonderful shot-stopper, a big body barrier, but is thought to be an old-school relic.

**Could centre-back and skipper Marquinhos be in danger of losing his place to Illia Zabarnyi, the new arrival from Bournemouth?**
Marquinhos, PSG's captain for over a decade, has never been under any real pressure for his spot in the starting line-up. Not even when losing some of his pace in the last couple of years and no longer the ultra-consistent performer of yore. The smart money has to be on Zabarnyi imminently taking over.

**Are PSG taking a risk in having no cover at right-back for the outstanding Achraf Hakimi?**
Luis Enrique's response to that question is that he has more than enough flexible players in his squad to fill the gap. The PSG head coach adores attacking full-backs and, in an emergency, would be more than happy to deploy midfielders Joao Neves or Warren Zaire-Emery in the Hakimi role.

# The Heavyweights

## ARSENAL

*Now or never for Arteta?*

When it comes to fan assessments of Mikel Arteta's near six-year stint as Arsenal manager, two distinct camps tend to crystallise. For the harder to please, a haul of just one major trophy – the FA Cup in 2020 – represents a poor return for a club of the Gunners' size and prestige. In the other camp the more patient "trust the process" types, who recognise how deep in the doldrums the club were before Arteta brought about a huge change in mood at the club, point to the number of near-misses in that time: Premier League runners-up three seasons in a row, as well as Champions League semi-finalists in 2024-25, notably beating PSG in the group phase and Real Madrid home and away in the quarters.

With more than £250m spent on reinforcements this summer, including Sweden striker Viktor Gyokeres, Spain defensive midfielder Martin Zubimendi and ex-Crystal Palace star Eberechi Eze, Arteta is fast approaching make-or-break territory in his pursuit of silverware.

Arsenal's new striker ...Viktor Gyokeres

**Arsenal have been crying out for a genuine number nine for a long time. Is Gyokeres the answer?**
The Swede proved himself a prolific marksman in his two years in Portugal with Sporting, scoring a wondrous 97 goals in 102 games. But the 27-year-old still remains an unknown quantity at the highest level, with zero experience in a top-five European league.

**COACH**
**Mikel Arteta**
The Gunners' former captain will celebrate his sixth anniversary in charge at the Emirates in December.

**KEY MAN**
**Bukayo Saka**
How Arsenal missed their star winger when sidelined for a long spell last term with a damaged hamstring.

**YOUNGSTER**
**Max Dowman**
Prodigious talent, still only 15 and already making waves. A European cameo is not out of the question.

**Can midfield general Martin Odegaard bounce back after a dramatic loss of form last season?**
Arsenal's captain struggled to find his groove in 2024-25 after suffering an early season ankle injury. A sound start to the new campaign should help him no end, as will the new arrivals. The platform provided by Zubimendi and Declan Rice behind him should allow the Norwegian to have his juices flowing in more advanced areas, while having Eze to help shoulder the creative burden should ease the pressure on the skipper.

**Who is the most underrated of the new signings?**
While certain Arsenal fans have a blind spot for players bought from Chelsea, England winger Noni Madueke could well make them eat their words. An exceptional dribbler, pacy, direct and able to operate on either flank, the 23-year-old is much more than someone to throw into the rotation mix.

## BARCELONA

*Thrilling in attack, leaky at the back*

Barca, redesigned and rejuvenated by German coach Hansi Flick, had the bit between their teeth all last season, completing the domestic treble of La Liga, the Copa del Rey and Super Cup, beating arch-rivals Real Madrid on no fewer than four occasions and only narrowly succumbing to Internazionale in a Champions League semi-final for the ages. Flamboyant, adventurous and expressive, they were arguably the best side on the continent in 2024-25 and might well have completed a clean sweep with a little less naivety against Inter, ultimately undone by their recklessly high defensive line.

With their brilliant front three of Lamine Yamal, Raphinha and Robert Lewandowski and the creative class of Pedri, Gavi and Dani Olmo, the *Blaugrana* are dynamite going forward. But must, as a matter of urgency, add a touch of pragmatism to the *joie de vivre*. If only they were not so hooked on off-field chaos: crippling debts, scrambling to deal with La Liga salary cap rules and a comedic struggle to register players.

Teenage superstar... Lamine Yamal

**Have Barca picked up a bargain in new goalkeeper Joan Garcia?**
Bought for just €25m from cross-town rivals Espanyol, Garcia is a fine prospect between the posts and will be an excellent replacement for Germany international Marc-Andre ter Stegen.

**COACH**
**Hansi Flick**
Boasts a 78 per cent win ratio from three previous Champions League campaigns, and led Bayern to the trophy in 2020.

**KEY MAN**
**Lamine Yamal**
Only 18 years of age and already the most remarkable and entertaining player on the planet today.

**YOUNGSTER**
**Jofre**
Another gem from *La Masia*, 18, who recently made his first-team debut at left-back.

**Was allowing Inigo Martinez to move to Saudi Arabia a mistake?**
The Barca bean-counters would say they had to offload Martinez in order to ease their financial issues. Fans and team-mates would disagree. The centre-back was hugely popular, a tremendous source of leadership and stability.

**Will new attacker Roony Bardghji find himself squeezed out of the first-team picture?**
That may well be the outcome for the 19-year-old Swedish right-winger, who arrived from FC Copenhagen in the summer. Barca already have a surfeit of back-ups in this department – Marcus Rashford, Ferran Torres and Fermin Lopez – but still saw enough from Bardghji in an electrifying pre-season to name him in their European squad.

# BAYERN MUNICH

*Standards slipping?*

In all parts of the Bayern organisation, players, coaching staff and board, the pressure continues to ratchet up in the European arena. Since winning the Champions League in 2019-20, the Bavarians have flatlined by their high standards, unable to do better than a semi-final exit in 2023-24 and four eliminations at the last-eight stage.

Most clubs would be proud of such a record. However not here, where the trophy cabinet contains no fewer than six European crowns. It's all well and good securing 12 of the last 13 German titles, but many in these parts feel that Bayern are no longer contenders at the highest continental level. To underline these claim, critics make reference to what they regard as the club's reduced attractiveness in the transfer market.

And they may have a point. The club's biggest buy of the summer, Colombian winger Luis Diaz, for whom they paid Liverpool €70m, and loanee Nicolas Jackson (Chelsea) left some fans feeling underwhelmed – particularly as players such as Nico Williams (Athletic Club), Bradley Barcola (PSG) and Jamie Gittens (before swapping Dortmund for Chelsea) had also been linked. Meanwhile another top target, young Stuttgart striker Nick Woltemade, ultimately opted for the Premier League and Newcastle United instead of a move to Bavaria.

Major summer signing... Luis Diaz

**Do Bayern have enough quality at centre-back?**

The harsh truth is that the Bavarians have suffered with a soft centre at the back for years. Since 2021, they have spent heavily on the likes of Matthijs de Ligt, Dayot Upamecano, Kim Min-Jae, Hiroki Ito and Eric Dier, all to little avail. They hope to have more luck with Jonathan Tah, recently acquired from Bayer Leverkusen. The 29-year-old Germany international was an integral figure in his former side's sensational Bundesliga triumph of 2023-24.

**COACH**

**Vincent Kompany**
So much for all who thought the former Burnley boss would be out of his depth at Bayern. Intelligent, wise and flexible.

**KEY MAN**

**Michael Olise**
The former Crystal Palace attacker is now worth double the €60m Bayern paid for him 12 months ago.

**YOUNGSTER**

**Lennart Karl**
The diminutive winger or attacking midfielder looks like a ball-boy, but plays in the style of a maestro.

**How will Bayern fare in the absence of Jamal Musiala, who is out injured until the end of the year?**

Without the attacking midfielder's rare ability to make things happen, Bayern are simply not the same, but it's not the end of the world. Coach Vincent Kompany has been using Serge Gnabry in the number ten role and generally it's worked out well, with Diaz and Michael Olise contributing from the flanks. Still, Musiala's return will be most welcome, and could give the squad a most valuable boost for the final stages.

**Would it be fair to say that Leon Goretzka has been completely revitalised in midfield?**

Absolutely. Not so long ago, the press were confidently calling him yesterday's man. Unfortunately for those branding him a whipping boy, nobody seemed to tell Goretzka, who still commands a spot in the starting line-up and was recalled by the national team earlier this year.

# INTERNAZIONALE

*Big questions for last year's finalists*

The *Nerazzurri* face a severe test of their character after their trials and tribulations in the latter stages of last season, trounced 5-0 by PSG in the Champions League final and just a point shy of Napoli in the race for the Serie A crown.

Naturally, Inter will be doing their best to look on the bright side, to regard those disappointments as nothing more than a temporary disruption to normal service. Twice Champions League losing finalists in the last three years, they would not have gone so far without a tough mentality, regularly seeing off teams blessed with more big names and flair.

For the past four seasons under head coach Simone Inzaghi, the Black-and-Blues formed a band of brothers worth far more than the sum of their parts. Whenever they were up against it, they invariably seemed to come through. The all-important question is whether Inter will play with the same resilience now that Inzaghi has left for Saudi side Al Hilal, replaced by the ex-Inter defender Cristian Chivu, who began his coaching journey with the club's youth team before accepting an offer to be Parma's head coach.

Last year's runners-up... Internazionale

**Inter's first-choice as new coach was reportedly Como's Cesc Fabregas. How risky is the Chivu appointment?**

For many supporters and pundits, Chivu is simply not ready for such a major challenge. As they rightly point out, the Romanian is a coaching novice at the pro level, his experience limited to just 13 Serie A games with Parma. He will have to learn fast. In his defence, Chivu will point to a first-class footballing education: brought up at the Ajax academy and later heavily influenced by former Inter boss Jose Mourinho.

**COACH**

**Cristian Chivu**
The Romanian was on the pitch the last time Inter were crowned European champions back in 2009-10.

**KEY MAN**

**Yann Sommer**
How many times did the 36-year-old keep Inter's head above water with great stops last season?

**YOUNGSTER**

**Francesco Pio Esposito**
Italy's standout young attacking talent. Big brother Sebastiano is also on Inter's books, on loan at Cagliari.

**Should we expect Chivu to instigate a revolution at Inter?**

Not especially. The chances are that Chivu will stick to Inzaghi's 3-5-2 template and mainly keep faith with the first XI from last season. If change occurs, it will likely concern the style of play. Chivu has intimated that he wants the *Nerazzurri* to be more combative and direct, letting loose the pressing dogs higher up the pitch.

**Which of the new signings could have the biggest impact?**

With a fair wind behind him, the ex-Dinamo Zagreb midfielder Petar Sucic, 21, has the potential to be an automatic starter. He has been tested by Chivu in all manner of midfield roles and looked the part every time, cutting an impressive figure at the Club World Cup in the summer.

# The Heavyweights

## ATLETICO MADRID

*Another Atleti overhaul*

Continuity no longer seems to be a prime concern for Atleti who, for the second year in a row, have gone into overdrive in the transfer market. After spending big 12 months ago on the likes of Julian Alvarez, Alexander Sorloth, Robin Le Normand and Conor Gallagher, the *Colchoneros* have once again rolled the dice, adding nine new players and letting just as many go.

At a cost of €175m, Atletico have made a number of excellent acquisitions, including Slovakia centre-back David Hancko (ex-Feyenoord), busy, combative USA midfielder Johnny Cardoso (Real Betis) and a pair of good quality Italians in defender Matteo Ruggeri (Atalanta) and forward Giacomo Raspadori (Napoli).

Undoubtedly the pick of the new boys is diminutive Spanish international left-winger Alex Baena, who arrived from Villarreal in a deal that could rise to €50m with bonuses. Diego Simeone has been a huge fan of Baena for some time and is convinced the 24-year-old's ball skills, creativity, long-range shooting and set-piece accuracy will give the *Rojiblancos* an important new dimension.

Another overhaul ...Atletico Madrid

**Have Atletico overdone it with their extensive first-team changes?**
In their opening game of the league season, a 2-1 loss at Espanyol, five of their summer signings were in the starting XI and, unsurprisingly, solid teamwork was barely in evidence. Building understanding takes time, especially in the Atleti world of extreme intensity.

**How badly will Atleti miss Rodrigo De Paul after he joined Inter Miami?**
De Paul could blow hot and cold. But on his many good days, his influence in the engine room was enormous, exceptional at initiating moves from deep and brimming over with football IQ, vision and rhythm-changing authority. Atleti currently have no one of his ilk.

**Is Julian Alvarez happy at Atletico?**
On the eve of the new season, members of Alvarez's entourage made a number of incendiary comments on *El Chiringuito TV*, arguing that by playing Alvarez out of position on the wing and by subbing him at half-time, Simeone "doesn't know how to handle a star." But reports elsewhere claim that Alvarez is happy at the club, has a great relationship with the coach and is even in talks over a new contract.

**COACH**
**Diego Simeone**
You have to hand it to the long-serving Atleti boss, 14 years in the job and still fired up.

**KEY MAN**
**Alex Baena**
One of the very best creators in La Liga. Always involved, ever alert and invariably a threat to opposition defenders.

**YOUNGSTER**
**Marc Pubill**
Quick and aggressive right-back recently acquired from Almeria. A gold medallist with Spain at the 2024 Paris Olympics.

## MANCHESTER CITY

*Can Guardiola go again?*

All eyes will be on Pep Guardiola's City side to see how they react to their wholly underwhelming efforts of last season, a rare trophyless campaign in which they lost their way both at home and abroad.

European champions as recently as 2023, City crashed out in the knockout round play-offs last term, swatted aside by a Real Madrid side with much more mental fortitude and street smarts. A host of high-quality signings, including ex-Wolves left-back Rayan Ait-Nouri, Dutch midfielder Tijjani Reijnders (Milan), Italy goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma (PSG) and France playmaker Rayan Cherki (Lyon) should help to spark a revival, though the latter will be sidelined for the opening rounds through injury.

And that is what Pep needs above all, better luck with injuries – along with a vast improvement on the defensive side of the ball and more steel and resilience. A fully-fit Rodri, who missed the entirety of last season with an ACL injury, would be an absolute godsend. Without his calming influence, distribution skills and toughness, City often resmbled a super yacht with no steering wheel.

City goal machine ...Erling Haaland

**What will new midfielder Tijjani Reijnders bring to the party?**
Somewhat underrated in both his native Netherlands and Italy, the former Milan midfielder offers relentless box-to-box action and an urgency in possession that will help City no end. Dynamism and quick-thinking are perhaps his strongest suits. At £46.5m, he looks a total snip.

**Do City need to up their firepower?**
The stats don't lie. They racked up 72 goals in the Premier League last season, a considerable reduction from hauls of 96, 94 and 99 in the three previous campaigns. Erling Haaland, who notched 22 goals in 2024-25, was not as prolific as usual, but the burden needs to be shared among the supporting cast.

**What is the state of play with Rodri's medical bulletin?**
After last season's ruptured cruciate ligament, the 2024 Ballon d'Or winner suffered another setback at the Club World Cup, laid low by a groin injury. Named in City's European squad, he should be fully fit for the league phase.

**COACH**
**Pep Guardiola**
The need to fix many broken parts at City probably represents the most onerous challenge of his nine years in charge.

**KEY MAN**
**Erling Haaland**
Goal-grabber extraordinaire, the Norwegian has a magnificent scoring record in this competition.

**YOUNGSTER**
**Oscar Bobb**
Young Norway winger with a flair for dancing through tight spots. Fit again after a broken leg.

# BORUSSIA DORTMUND

## *Chasing intensity and consistency*

The good news for the vociferous massed ranks of Dortmund fans is that their club has made a habit of pulling out all the stops in the Champions League of late, losing finalists against Real Madrid in 2023-24 and making the quarter-finals 12 months later. The bad news is that they have a tendency to wait until their backs are against the wall before turning up. That was their exact modus operandi in the Bundesliga last season, dysfunctional for much of the campaign before sensationally securing Champions League qualification with win upon win in their last eight fixtures.

Tempo, urgency and combativeness are the watchwords for coach Niko Kovac, instructions that new midfield signing Jobe Bellingham, formerly with Sunderland in the English second tier, was only too happy to adhere to during an impressive baptism for the *Schwarz-Gelben* at this summer's Club World Cup.

"[Kovac] wants us to play with more intensity," declared Jobe, whose elder brother Jude used Dortmund as a springboard to greatness. "We have to press aggressively and look to be on the front foot. With the quality we have here, we can be much more consistent."

Summer signing... Jobe Bellingham

### What were the headline deals in the summer transfer window?

The sale of English winger Jamie Gittens, a regular in this competition last season, to Chelsea for a deal worth around £50m helped fund a number of interesting incomings. Arriving in a reverse direction from Stamford Bridge was Carney Chukwuemeka after last season's loan spell, forming an English engine room with Jobe Bellingham. The latter made an immediate impact on arrival, oozing self-confidence and desire, while permanent deals for loanee full-backs Yan Couto and Daniel Svensson made perfect sense.

**COACH**
**Niko Kovac**
The Croat pulled off a three-month miracle last term. Has racked up over 400 games in his coaching career.

**KEY MAN**
**Serhou Guirassy**
Nobody scored more goals in last season's Champions League than the Guinean hot shot, who netted 13.

**YOUNGSTER**
**Daniel Svensson**
Sweden left-back who in the last few months has gone from anonymous mid-season recruit to Bundesliga revelation.

Former Wolves striker Fabio Silva has potential that he is so far yet to realise, but will help to bolster the attack after Sebastien Haller was allowed to leave for Eredivisie outfit Utrecht and Gio Reyna exited for Borussia Monchengladbach.

### Who is the best option in the role of holding midfielder?

This represents quite a dilemma for coach Kovac. Pascal Gross is not the fastest, while Jobe Bellingham, Marcel Sabitzer and Julian Brandt all offer more in attacking mode. Perhaps the best solution would be the deployment of the quick and dynamic Felix Nmecha. The former Wolfsburg man has failed to nail down a regular position since arriving in 2023, but he reads the game well and is snappy and accurate in his passing.

### Is there enough attacking support for striker Serhou Guirassy?

Karim Adeyemi is one of the best wide forwards in the country and netted five Champions League goals last term, but can be enigmatic. Having had a year to settle at the club, BVB will also be hoping Maximilian Beier improves on his solitary goal in last season's European campaign.

# CHELSEA

## *Blue is the colour in 2025*

Their morale sent into orbit by triumph at this summer's Club World Cup, Chelsea now have the ideal platform for a concerted push for the trophy they have lifted twice in the past 13 years (2011-12 and 2020-21).

For much of last season, the Blues were the epitome of inconsistency, but came good when they had to in the final stretch, winning five of their last six Premier League games to clinch a Champions League berth at the death, then securing the Conference League and Club World Cup titles. The 3-0 victory over hot favourites PSG in that Stateside final was hugely impressive, a blend of astute tactical scheming by head coach Enzo Maresca and the intensity of the players.

Not so long ago, many Chelsea fans were loudly complaining about the sterile nature of Maresca's football. Now they are singing a different tune, delighted with the global glory, the return to the European top table after two years away and the excitement generated by attacking midfield phenomenon Cole Palmer.

Creator-in-chief and rising star... Cole Palmer and Estevao

### How will opponents try to neutralise Chelsea as an attacking force?

The top priority must be the shackling of the Blues creator-in-chief, Cole Palmer, who is often the only player operating between the lines. Despite the many millions spent on bolstering their attacking ranks, the fact remains that when Palmer gets crowded out, Chelsea can become crab-like, over-dosing on slow and deliberate sideways passes. If a member of the supporting cast can step up and help the England man in his playmaking duties, it would work wonders for Chelsea.

**COACH**
**Enzo Maresca**
As befits Pep Guardiola's former assistant, advocates a highly structured system of play.

**KEY MAN**
**Cole Palmer**
That Manchester City deemed him surplus to requirements is a mystery for the ages. Languid, cool and effortlessly magic.

**YOUNGSTER**
**Romeo Lavia**
The Belgium midfielder, 21, is a superb ball carrier but has suffered with injury issues.

### Who will step into the breach after centre-back Levi Colwill snapped cruciate ligaments in pre-season?

Enzo Maresca rightly has a great deal of faith in Josh Acheampong, 19, who has all the requisite physicality, athleticism, composure and ability on the ball. The aerially dominant Tosin Adarabioyo will get his chance too, as will Wesley Fofana, but the left-footed Jorrel Hato, recently acquired from Ajax, probably resembles the most like-for-like replacement.

### Chelsea's new winger Estevao has been dubbed the best youngster to emerge from Brazil since Vinicius Junior. Hype or reality?

It speaks volumes that Real Madrid, Barcelona and Bayern Munich all tried and failed to do a deal for the 18-year-old ex-Palmeiras tyro. Fast, mobile, elusive and blessed with two-footed technical ability of the highest order, he can pose a huge threat on either flank or in the hole. A world-class gem.

# The Dark Horses

## JUVENTUS

*Dreaming of better days*

Juventus are not the domestic and European powerhouse that they once were. They have not picked up a Serie A title for five years, their last Champions League triumph was way back in 1996 and they almost missed out on this season's competition. A 3-2 victory over relegated Venezia on the final weekend was just enough for them to edge out Roma by a single point in the battle for the coveted fourth place in Serie A.

Embarrassment avoided by the barest of margins, the *Bianconeri* probably would not have reached port if they had not pulled the plug on the lifeless regime of Thiago Motta in March, replacing him with former club centre-back Igor Tudor.

Most supporters were underwhelmed when Tudor was appointed, pointing out that he had achieved relatively little in spells in charge of Udinese, Hajduk Split, Verona, Marseille and Lazio. Yet it proved ultimately to be the right call, the new boss instilling a fighting spirit and directness that had been sadly missing.

Free transfer... Jonathan David

### How does Juve's transfer activity compare to the last few windows?

The €200m Juve invested across the previous two markets produced little in the way of squad enhancement, with the prime example being the expensive bust that was Brazilian midfielder Douglas Luiz from Aston Villa. They've kept a tighter grip on the purse strings this summer, acquiring Canada hot-shot Jonathan David on a free transfer from Lille and Belgium forward Lois Openda on loan from RB Leipzig, while the money spent on right-back Joao Mario from Porto and winger Edon Zhegrova from Lille looks like a wise allocation of funds.

**COACH**
**Igor Tudor**
Juve's first foreign boss since Frenchman Didier Deschamps held the reins there in 2006-07.

**KEY MAN**
**Kenan Yildiz**
Bayern Munich certainly missed a trick when they failed to convince their academy starlet that his future lay with them.

**YOUNGSTER**
**Khephren Thuram**
Juve's go-to figure in the engine room. The young Frenchman, 24, almost dribbles as well as Yildiz.

### What was the mood among the fans on the eve of the new season?

Generally speaking, optimism abounds. What supporters are especially excited about is the potentially explosive link-up between Turkey playmaker Kenan Yildiz and new boy David, who gave a taste of what he can do in pre-season by scoring an overhead-kick against Atalanta.

### How will Juve set up tactically?

Tudor prefers 3-4-2-1, in which the emphasis is on an aggressive high press and matching up for one-on-one duels all over the field. Unlike Motta, he doesn't care for possession for possession's sake, looking to catch out opposition defences with quick vertical balls.

## TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR

*Happy to be here*

Since beating Manchester United in last season's Europa League final to secure a Champions League spot, Spurs have been an epicentre for changes and shockwaves. First, manager Ange Postecoglou was fired almost instantly, his fate sealed by an abysmal 17th-place finish in the English top flight, their worst-ever Premier League placing, with Thomas Frank duly appointed to take over. Then, just a fortnight before the Champions League was due to kick off, chairman Daniel Levy departed the club.

And there were earthquakes on the pitch too. First, legendary Korean attacker Son Heung-min opted to move to LAFC after a decade in North London, then outstanding playmaker James Maddison tore his ACL in pre-season, sidelining him for the bulk of the upcoming campaign.

European football will be something of a bonus for Spurs in the months ahead. Their priority should be to restore their Premier League credentials after 22 defeats last season. Expectations in Europe will not be especially high, but that may well prove to be their best friend.

Europa League winners ...Tottenham Hotspur

### How to replace James Maddison?

New boy Xavi Simons, whose signing has really excited Spurs fans, should slip into the role seamlessly. Another solution could be to give the job to the highly promising Pape Matar Sarr. The Senegal youngster may not have Maddison or Simons' creativity, but he adds an extra dimension to Spurs' pressing game that could come in handy against the very elite sides. Alternatively, young Swede Lucas Bergvall has the flair to fill in, too.

**COACH**
**Thomas Frank**
An astute man-manager, tactically flexibile, with sharp analytical skills and charisma.

**KEY MAN**
**Cristian Romero**
The fiery Argentina centre-back is Spurs' new captain and has signed a new deal at the club until 2029.

**YOUNGSTER**
**Lucas Bergvall**
A midfield all-rounder with technical polish, vision, stamina, confidence and feistiness.

### Will Spurs be as proactive on the flanks as Frank's old club Brentford?

Frank loves to create overloads out wide, with quality balls being whipped in across the face of goal. His Brentford were among the best crossers in the Premier League and the same route map is sure to be used here, with Pedro Porro in his element.

### How will the attack shape up?

Brennan Johnson, Mohammed Kudus and Richarlison worked in tandem for Spurs' opening matches, but Dominic Solanke and new signing Randal Kolo Muani will come into the equation. One player who won't star is £30m signing Mathys Tel, who was surprisingly left out of their CL squad.

# BAYER LEVERKUSEN

*The season's first crisis club*

It did not take long for the post-Xabi Alonso era to fall apart at the BayArena, with new Dutch head coach Erik ten Hag unceremoniously sacked just two games in to the new Bundesliga season, both of which were unmitigated disasters: a 2-1 defeat at home to Hoffenheim, before conceding two late goals to the ten men of Werder Bremen in a 3-3 draw.

"Nobody wanted to take this step," declared managing director Simon Rolfes. "However, the past few weeks have shown that building a new and successful team with this set-up is not feasible."

Just 16 months after Alonso's side made history with an invincible league-cup double in 2023-24, the *Werkself* now find themselves back at square one. This follows a summer exodus of some of the club's best players, including keeper Lukas Hradecky, centre-backs Jonathan Tah and Piero Hincapie, rapid wing-back Jeremie Frimpong, engine-room strategist Granit Xhaka, Morocco winger Amine Adli, attacking midfield ace Florian Wirtz and Nigeria forward Victor Boniface.

Ten Hag, now the subject of the quickest sacking in Bundesliga history, said in a statement: "Many key players who were part of past successes left the squad. Building a new, cohesive team is a careful process that requires both time and trust." Evidently, this was something Leverkusen were unwilling to offer him.

Technically gifted... Leverkusen striker Patrik Schick

**How is the mood at the club after losing so many difference-makers?**
With Xhaka and Wirtz no longer there to provide the stability and technical magic, realism is now the order of the day. "The most important players have gone and that naturally hurts us," admitted Czech striker Patrik Schick.

**Where, specifically, have Leverkusen lost the most ground because of the many high-profile departures?**
Wirtz and Frimpong were by far the team's most potent one-on-one weapons. The pair will be exceedingly hard to replace. In the attacking-third generally, the *Werkself* have lost a great deal of creativity, improvisational flair and ability to take an opponent by surprise.

**What's the verdict on Leverkusen's incoming summer signings?**
The club has invested heavily in potential this summer, with new arrivals Eliesse Ben Seghir (Monaco), Malik Tillman (PSV), Jarrel Quansah (Liverpool), Axel Tape (PSG), Equi Fernandez (Al Qadsiah), Ibrahim Maza (Hertha Berlin), Christian Kofane (Albacete) and Ernest Poku (AZ) all aged 23 or younger. In amongst that splurge on youth was a wise old head: ex-Real Madrid winger or right-back Lucas Vazquez, signed on a free transfer.

**COACH**
**Kasper Hjulmand**
The ex-Denmark boss was thrust into the hot seat in September after the shock sacking of Erik ten Hag.

**KEY MAN**
**Patrik Schick**
Technically-gifted Czech striker who spectacularly took up the slack last term when Nigerian Victor Boniface fell injured.

**YOUNGSTER**
**Claudio Echeverri**
Highly-rated Argentine attacking midfielder, on loan from Manchester City, tasked with filling Wirtz's shoes.

# MONACO

*A sprinkling of stardust*

At the Monegasque controls for the past two seasons, Austrian head coach Adi Hutter has more than lived up to expectations of the club's board by twice qualifying his side for the Champions League, first via the runners-up spot in Ligue 1 in 2023-24 and then by securing a third-place finish last term.

Hutter's side only narrowly missed out on a place in last season's Champions League last 16, losing 4-3 on aggregate in the knockout round play-offs to Benfica, and there were times in that European adventure when Monaco truly turned on the style, particularly in home wins over Red Star Belgrade (5-1) and a 2-1 toppling of the mighty Barcelona.

If there's an air of optimism blowing in the principality at the moment, it is essentially down to the huge amount of experience they have managed to recruit this summer, players of the knowhow of midfield ace Paul Pogba, ex-Bayer Leverkusen keeper Lukas Hradecky and former Tottenham Hotspur and Bayern Munich central defender Eric Dier. A key figure in France's World Cup triumph in 2018, the 32-year-old Pogba has been in the footballing wilderness for the past couple of years, but could be set for a return to action in October.

High-profile signing... Paul Pogba

**How important was the decision not to sell captain and defensive midfielder Denis Zakaria?**
The news that the dynamic Switzerland international was staying would have put a huge smile on the faces of all Monaco fans. He is the beating heart of the team and so devoted to the cause that he apparently rejected overtures from several other clubs. According to reports, a deal was close to being struck with Saudi side Al Ahli.

**Which player in the Monaco ranks has the most to gain from this season's Champions League?**
Positive performances in Europe will definitely boost the market profile of young Denmark striker Mika Biereth, 22, who has been piling up the goals ever since arriving from Sturm Graz midway through last season. Maghnes Akliouche, the recently capped 23-year-old France winger, could also prosper from some standout European displays.

**Why is the signing of goalkeeper Lukas Hradecky from Bayer Leverkusen so significant?**
With neither Philipp Kohn nor Radoslaw Majecki convincing as the last-line-of-defence last season, a major upgrade was required and the former Leverkusen captain and current Finland custodian more than fits the bill. A cornerstone of the Leverkusen side that claimed the double in Germany in 2023-24.

**COACH**
**Adi Hutter**
The former Salzburg, Young Boys, Eintracht and Gladbach boss is thriving in his first role outside the German-speaking world.

**KEY MAN**
**Paul Pogba**
Will make his debut after the Champions League kicks off, but his experience will be a huge plus.

**YOUNGSTER**
**George Ilenikhena**
Highly promising 19-year-old Nigerian forward who scored the winner against Barcelona in last season's competition.

# The Dark Horses

## ATHLETIC CLUB

*Back in the big time*

Back in the Champions League after an absence of just over a decade, the Basque outfit are not exactly familiar faces at this level of continental competition, with only two previous Champions League campaigns to their name (1998-99 and 2014-15), knocked out at the group stage on both occasions.

But don't write the Lions off yet. Specialists in togetherness, grit and tapping into the boundless local passion for the game, Athletic can be formidable opponents and have other trump cards to play, namely the wily coach Ernesto Valverde, first-choice Spain goalkeeper Unai Simon and national team colleague Nico Williams, who signed a ten-year contract with the club this summer.

Williams, heavily linked with the likes of Barcelona, Bayern Munich and Arsenal, came through the club's youth ranks and sees the San Mames as his home. "The support at the club is incredible and it's like a family for me," he said after a man-of-the-match display in the first La Liga game of the season, a 3-2 win at home to Sevilla. "I want to make history here."

Staying put... Nico Williams

### Who is the team's heart and soul?

Centre-back Dani Vivian symbolises the essence of this proud Basque club, the indomitable spirit, determination, power and leadership by example. A Spain international, his uncomplicated, totally committed approach makes him something of an early 1980s throwback, an era when Athletic dominated La Liga.

**COACH**
**Ernesto Valverde**
In his third spell at the helm, one of only six coaches to have clocked up over 300 La Liga games.

**KEY MAN**
**Nico Williams**
The release clause in his new contract has been increased by 50 per cent, taking the figure to around €90m.

**YOUNGSTER**
**Mikel Jauregizar**
Ever-purposeful central midfielder, who took La Liga by storm last season. Says he can not imagine playing anywhere else.

### Will key midfielder Oihan Sancet be available for the kick-off?

After limping off during a pre-season fixture against Liverpool, the immediate prognosis from the Athletic medical department was that the schemer-cum-goalscorer had damaged, but not torn, knee ligaments and would be out for a couple of months. Two weeks later, he was back in full training, the injury far less serious than feared.

### What does the future hold for central defender Yeray Alvarez?

The 30-year-old, normally a first-teamer, was suspended by UEFA for ten months for failing a drug test following a Europa League semi against Manchester United last spring. Yeray was diagnosed with testicular cancer in 2016 and says he unintentionally ingested a banned substance in medicine to treat hair loss.

## MARSEILLE

*Rocked by yet another crisis*

In yet another example of the Provencal club shooting itself in the foot, OM began the new campaign in the worst possible way, engulfed in controversy after two players, France midfielder Adrien Rabiot and England U21 attacker Jonathan Rowe, came to blows after a 1-0 loss at Rennes. The dressing-room scrap, described by Marseille club president Pablo Longoria as "extremely violent", resulted in both men being sold, but that may not be the last we hear of it.

Last season's Ligue 1 runners-up had been shaping up rather well, with coach Roberto De Zerbi turning down several job offers from his native Italy, the club retaining many in-demand stars (including Rabiot himself) and buying wisely. The list of newcomers includes Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang, back for a second spell, ex-Manchester United midfielder Angel Gomes, signed from Lille, and Brazilian forward Igor Paixao, snapped up from Feyenoord for a club record €30m.

Passionate club ...Marseille

### Is De Zerbi a good fit for Marseille?

In terms of passion, the former Shakhtar Donetsk, Sassuolo and Brighton boss is a mirror image of the Marseille fanbase, emotional to the Nth degree. This has endeared him to the OM faithful but he can sometimes go too far with the knee-jerk, letting rip in fiery press conferences.

**COACH**
**Roberto De Zerbi**
Explosive character whose teams attack with the same sort of combustibility, bursting forward with waves of runners.

**KEY MAN**
**Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang**
After netting 31 goals in just 50 games in his first spell at OM, Auba is looking to pick up where he left off.

**YOUNGSTER**
**CJ Egan-Riley**
Versatile Manchester-born defender, who has settled quickly after his summer move from Burnley.

### How important will the fans be at the Velodrome this campaign?

While the Marseille faithful can quickly turn on the team or individual players if they don't feel they are seeing sufficient commitment, they can also transform the ground into an inferno of intimidation for the opposition. These are committed followers; almost 127,000 turned up for two pre-season friendlies this summer.

### President Pablo Longoria wants to make OM one of the top 20 clubs in Europe. Is that feasible?

While they undoubtedly have the fanbase and the revenue-generating ability, the chronic instability is an ambition-buster for Marseille. They have chewed through 33 different head coaches this century, and in both of their last two Champions League campaigns (2020-21 and 2022-23) finished rock bottom in their group-stage pools.

# NAPOLI

*Club and coach to break their curse?*

Could this be the season that Napoli, Italian champions in two of the last three campaigns, finally make their mark in the Champions League? *Gli Azzurri* have never gone beyond the quarter-finals of Europe's top stage (beaten 2-1 over two legs by Milan in 2022-23) and given the passion, professionalism and dedication to winning that coach Antonio Conte has embedded in the team's psyche in just one season in charge, a deep run in Europe should not be beyond them.

Then again, Conte's European record is not exactly stellar either. The former Juventus, Chelsea, Inter and Spurs boss has won just 15 of the 42 Champions League matches he has overseen, crashing out at the group stage in three out of six campaigns. His only knockout-round victory was in 2012-13, when his Juve side beat Celtic in the last 16.

Conte has, though, been backed in the transfer window. Napoli owner Aurelio De Laurentiis does not normally take kindly to a coach handing him a specific list of recruits, but seems to have acceded to most of Conte's demands. New boys include veteran ex-Manchester City midfielder Kevin De Bruyne, towering target man Lorenzo Lucca (Udinese), maverick Dutch winger Noa Lang (PSV), left-back Miguel Gutierrez (Girona), Serbia goalkeeper Vanja Milinkovic-Savic (Torino) and another Dutchman in defence, Sam Beukema (Bologna).

Star power... Kevin De Bruyne

### How will Napoli cope in the absence of striker Romelu Lukaku, who tore a thigh muscle in pre-season?

The unavailability of Lukaku, who contributed 14 goals and ten assists to the club's *Scudetto* last term, leaves Conte with a massive hole to fill. The Belgian's muscular presence, hold-up play and marksmanship made him a vital part of Conte's plans and time limitations inevitably will hamper the execution of any Plan B. Another ex-Manchester United man, Rasmus Hojlund, loaned in on deadline day, will be tasked with filling Lukaku's huge shoes.

**COACH**
**Antonio Conte**
Five-time Serie A-winning coach with three different clubs: Juventus, Inter and Napoli.

**KEY MAN**
**Kevin De Bruyne**
As motivated as ever, the 34-year-old will bring much-needed creativity and sophistication to Napoli's midfield.

**YOUNGSTER**
**Rasmus Hojlund**
Still only 22, hoping to re-capture the form he showed at Atalanta in 2022-23, which convinced Manchester United to pay £64m for him.

### Is Antonio Conte more adventurous than he is often given credit for?

His Napoli certainly has an un-Conte look to it, with two of his midfielders, Scott McTominay and Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa, given freedom to roam where they please and break forward at will. Nothing cautious about this methodology.

### Why does Conte seem to suffer from a Champions League curse?

For a coach who specialises in winning domestic league titles, the Napoli boss has experienced no end of European disappointments. When quizzed on this recently, he put it down to a lack of time. "You don't just show up and win in the Champions League. It is a process," he explained. "My shortcoming has been not staying at clubs long enough. Had I done so, things would have turned out differently and I would have had longer runs in the competition."

# NEWCASTLE UNITED

*Still standing after unstable summer*

It should have been a summer of huge optimism in the Geordie city, sparked by one of the most memorable campaigns in the Magpies' history: victory over Liverpool in the League Cup final – the club's first trophy for 56 years – and Champions League qualification for the second time in three seasons.

But how quickly the bright emotional colours would turn to grey, the dismal tone set by star striker Alexander Isak, who spent the summer attempting to force through a move to Premier League champions Liverpool, a wish that was finally granted on deadline day. Without a director of sport or chief executive, a decision-making vacuum opened up at St James' Park, while Premier League profitability and sustainability rules have thrown a spanner in the recruitment works, with front-line targets such as Hugo Ekitike, Benjamin Sesko, Bryan Mbeumo and Joao Pedro all opting for other Premier League destinations.

The players they have brought in are anything but lightweights. Tasked with replacing Isak's goals are former Stuttgart startlet Nick Woltemade and ex-Brentford forward Yoane Wissa, with centre-back Malick Thiaw (Milan), midfielder Jacob Ramsey (Aston Villa) and winger Anthony Elanga (Nottingham Forest) also bolstering the ranks.

Captain fantastic... Bruno Guimaraes

### Were Newcastle misguided in their summer recruitment?

For much of the summer, it appeared so. The longer the window rolled on, the more bad news seemed to roll in, with as many as nine players reportedly turning the Magpies down. But after the window closed on September 1 they could reflect on over £200m spent and plenty of quality added. Eddie Howe will be glad to see the back of the window and to be allowed to focus on what he does best – improving his players.

**COACH**
**Eddie Howe**
Soon to complete four years at the club, the bright and articulate Howe has done a brilliant job.

**KEY MAN**
**Anthony Gordon**
Could become Newcastle's new attacking talisman – certainly has the pace, desire and belief to do so.

**YOUNGSTER**
**Nick Woltemade**
The German was hot property after winning the Golden Boot at the Euro U21s in the summer.

### Will the Isak shenanigans have a lasting effect on the club?

Isak's efforts to leave – refusing to go on pre-season tour, heading off to train at his old club Real Sociedad, missing the Magpies' opening three league fixtures and generally downing tools – definitely cast a pall over the Tyneside outfit and upset supporters. There might yet be a positive side to it all, with the rest of the squad pulling together even more.

### Where are Newcastle strongest?

Undoubtedly in midfield, where Bruno Guimaraes, Sandro Tonali and Joelinton make for a perfectly balanced trio of tenacity, power, poise, vision and self-expression. Tonali, now back in the saddle after a gambling ban, has been a revelation, catching the eye with his passing range, intelligence and industry.

# The Outsiders

## SPORTING

*Reigning kings of Portugal*

Portuguese champions for the second straight season, Sporting made history last term by defending the league title for the first time in 71 years. Quite an achievement in a campaign marked by upheaval, with coach Ruben Amorim leaving for Manchester United in November, his successor Joao Pereira lasting only six weeks and Rui Borges arriving just after Christmas to shrewdly steer them to glory, finishing two points ahead of capital city arch-rivals Benfica.

The most important item on the agenda this summer was how to fill the void left by the departure of prolific striker Viktor Gyokeres, who piled up 54 goals in 52 games across all competitions last term, as well as making 13 assists. The huge task of replacing the Arsenal-bound man has fallen to Colombian Luis Suarez, a €22m purchase from Spanish second division outfit Almeria.

Other new signings include Greece right-back Georgios Vagiannidis from Panathinaikos, Georgia midfielder Giorgi Kochorashvili (Levante), Brazilian winger Alisson Santos (EC Vitoria) and experienced keeper Rui Silva (Real Betis).

Mercurial talent... Francisco Trincao

**Do Sporting have enough depth to compete on all fronts this season?**
Despite the loss of Gyokeres, they have the strongest squad in the Portuguese top flight, with a surfeit of academy talent to call on too. It's a very settled group and fans will have been delighted to see such key figures as skipper and midfield anchor Morten Hjulmand stay, as well as centre-backs Ousmane Diomande and Goncalo Inacio.

**Where will the goals come from?**
New striker Luis Suarez knows how to put chances away, scoring 31 goals in all competitions for Almeria last term, while Fotis Ioannidis, a €22m signing from Panathinaikos, will share the burden. Wingers Francisco Trincao, a first-rate creator and finisher, and the brilliant Geovany Quenda, should weigh in too.

**A surprise revelation?**
One player who has started the new season like an express train is Ricardo Mangas, a 27-year-old attacking left-back signed from Spartak Moscow. The new boy faces competition for a starting spot from Matheus Reis, Nuno Santos and Maxi Araujo, but is already collecting brownie points.

**COACH**
**Rui Borges**
The 44-year-old did a fine job with Vitoria Guimaraes last season, steering them undefeated to second place in the Conference League league phase.

**KEY MAN**
**Francisco Trincao**
Moves to Barcelona and Wolves may not have worked out, but the left-footed forward remains a magical talent.

**YOUNGSTER**
**Ivan Fresneda**
Enterprising Spain U20 right-back now in his third season at Sporting.

## PSV

*Banishing bad memories*

Eredivisie champions in each of the last two seasons, PSV must urgently banish the bitter memories of their last Champions League encounter, a 9-3 aggregate drubbing at the hands of Arsenal. The tie was done and dusted in the first leg, when the Gunners won 7-1 in Eindhoven, the first time in Champions League history that an away team had scored so many in a knockout match. The gulf in class was canyon-wide and after a summer of rabid comings and goings on the transfer front, it's almost impossible to judge where they stand.

The sale of three of their most gifted players – Malik Tillman joined Leverkusen for €35m and wing kings Noa Lang and Johan Bakayoko left for Napoli and RB Leipzig respectively – can only be seen as a body blow. Adding to the exodus, keeper Walter Benitez, defender Olivier Boscagli and striker and skipper Luuk de Jong all left on free transfers for Crystal Palace, Brighton and Porto respectively.

Veteran winger ...Ivan Perisic

Coach Peter Bosz will have to work overtime to have a coherent team ready for Champions League football.

**Who are the standout new boys?**
A good sign is that several of them have pedigree in one of Europe's big leagues: ex-Valencia defender Yarek Gasiorowski, a pair of former Bundesliga pros in striker Alassane Plea (Gladbach) and full-back Kiliann Sildillia (Freiburg), and Romania winger Denis Man (Parma).

**Which incoming youngster has the best chance of really kicking on?**
Attacking midfielder Paul Wanner, signed from Bayern Munich for €15m, is a fine playmaking prospect and showed his strong character by prioritising regular game time with PSV over cameos in Munich. Bayern, who loaned him to Heidenheim last term, wrongly assumed he'd be happy with a bit-part brief.

**How important was the re-signing of veteran Croatian Ivan Perisic?**
Not for nothing does coach Bosz call the 36-year-old wide man a "model professional". His creative juices very much continue to flow, he is a goalscoring threat and excels as a leader. He certainly is a calming influence in difficult moments.

**COACH**
**Peter Bosz**
The Dutch king of the high press has extensive Champions League experience with Dortmund, Leverkusen and PSV.

**KEY MAN**
**Ruben van Bommel**
The son of PSV great Mark, recently signed from AZ. Has the potential to match his father's career.

**YOUNGSTER**
**Ismael Saibari**
Hugely gifted Morocco attacking midfielder. Joined from Belgian side Genk in 2020.

# VILLARREAL

*Dreaming of over-achieving*

Back in the Champions League after three years on the outside looking in, the Yellow Submarine very much over-achieved in their last elite expedition in 2021-22, reaching the semi-finals before losing out to Liverpool. They won't expect a repeat of that run – but then again, they didn't expect to go so far back then either.

Either way, there can be no denying the remarkable progress that they have made in the past couple of years, going from the edge of the relegation zone to last season's fifth-place La Liga finish. A result of the great restructuring work by their director of football Miguel Angel Tena and head coach Marcelino.

New signing... Tajon Buchanan

**Is the departure of creator-in-chief Alex Baena to Atletico Madrid a potentially fatal setback?**

In a pre-season interview, Marcelino appeared totally unperturbed by the loss of the team's attacking talisman.

**COACH**
**Marcelino**
Came back to the club in 2023, seven years after being sacked.

**KEY MAN**
**Ayoze Perez**
Can always be relied upon for his decisiveness and selflessness.

**YOUNGSTER**
**Alberto Moleiro**
The exciting recruit from Las Palmas has the skills to succeed Baena, but must not be rushed.

"It's the law of life, the law of the market. It's up to us to find the solution." Directly replacing a player who created more chances than anyone else in last season's La Liga will be near impossible. The challenge, then, is to replace his attacking output in the aggregate.

**Can midfield controller Dani Parejo remain a major contributor at 36?**

Why not? Players blessed with his vision, quick-thinking and technical execution are few and far between in Europe and it's no exaggeration to put him on a par with the likes of Manchester City and Spain's Rodri or the now retired Germany icon Toni Kroos.

# OLYMPIACOS

*On the rise*

The Piraeus club marked its centenary year in the best possible way back in the spring, completing the Greek league and cup double, sparking jubilant scenes at the Georgios Karaiskakis Stadium. Their Hellenic Super League title, sealed with a 1-0 home win over AEK Athens, was their first domestic crown in three seasons.

Winners of the Conference League in 2023-24, they are the only Greek side ever to claim a European trophy. That season also saw their Under-19s lift the UEFA Youth League, and the stars of that side are becoming established. Off the back of one of the most successful 12 months in the club's history, they will not be lacking in belief.

Goal machine... Ayoub El Kaabi

**Coach Mendilibar has a reputation for resurrecting players thought to have lost their mojo. Do any of this squad fall into that category?**

A prime example is centre-back and skipper Panagiotis Retsos, who under

**COACH**
**Jose Luis Mendilibar**
A European trophy winner with Sevilla and Olympiacos.

**KEY MAN**
**Ayoub El Kaabi**
Joint-top scorer in last season's Europa League.

**YOUNGSTER**
**Konstantinos Tzolakis**
Goalkeeper being watched by a number of big European clubs.

Mendilibar has gone from being an inconsistent performer to becoming the team's undisputed commander of operations. The same goes for the feisty Argentine defensive midfielder Santiago Hezze and Portuguese attacking midfielder Chiquinho.

**What will be their ace card in the Champions League?**

The four games they are due to host in their Piraeus backyard. They did not lose a single home game in any competition last term and the word "fortress" certainly applies here. The fans simply feed off the all-action style and commitment of Mendilibar's charges.

# GALATASARAY

*Ready to make a splash*

The Istanbul club have splashed the cash like never before this summer, aiming to not only win a fourth straight Turkish Super Lig title, but also make a big impact in Europe.

They paid a Turkish record fee of €75m to make striker Victor Osimhen's loan move from Napoli permanent, signed Ivory Coast right-back Wilfried Singo for €30m from Monaco, and committed to big contracts for Bayern Munich winger Leroy Sane and his former Germany team-mate Ilkay Gundogan.

They haven't reached the Champions League knockout stage since 2013-14, when they were knocked out by Jose Mourinho's Chelsea in the last 16.

Big-money signing... Victor Osimhen

**How difficult will it be to fit Sane, Osimhen and Mauro Icardi all into the same attack?**

Icardi, who tore his ACL against Spurs in last season's Europa League, will soon be fully fit again to partner Osimhen in

**COACH**
**Okan Buruk**
Part of the Gala side that won the UEFA Cup in 2000.

**KEY MAN**
**Victor Osimhen**
Last season's top scorer with 37 goals in all competitions.

**YOUNGSTER**
**Arda Unyay**
The 19-year-old centre-back is a "gem", says Buruk.

a striking duo, with Sane wide on the right. An explosive attacking unit, without doubt, but how much work will the trio put in in defensive mode? The rest of the midfield and back-line will need to provide the balance.

**Do they have a problem position?**

Doubts persist in relation to who should play in goal after impressive Uruguayan Fernando Muslera walked away after 14 years of first-class service. Manchester City's Ederson was the top target, but the Brazilian opted for Istanbul rivals Fenerbahce, so Gala settled for signing Turkey international Ugurcan Cakir for €27.5m from Trabzonspor instead.

# The Outsiders

## AJAX
*Returning to their roots*

The all-important question at the Amsterdam Arena is whether the psychological scars of last season have healed. Nine points clear at the top of the league after a 2-0 win at second-placed PSV in March, Ajax appeared set for their first title in three years, only for the wheels to spectacularly fall off, allowing PSV to overtake them.

Coach Francesco Farioli, left tearful and emotional by the sinking ship final chapter, swiftly offered his resignation and now the reins have passed to John Heitinga, a former Ajax defender who recently served as an assistant boss in the Premier League with West Ham United and Liverpool.

Heitinga, steeped in the club's traditions, should prove far less defensive-minded than the viscerally conservative Farioli. He also has to rebuild, following the departures to the Premier League of left-back Jorrel Hato (Chelsea), striker Brian Brobbey (Sunderland) and holding midfielder Jordan Henderson (Brentford).

Ajax new boy... Oscar Gloukh

**In the wake of last season's collapse, Ajax were accused of being mentally weak. A fair assessment?**
Yes, there was a rabbit-in-the-headlights vibe to them in the run-in, too quick to panic. But for much of the season, they were far from flaky, particularly impressive in the Eredivisie's most pressurised clashes, beating arch-rivals PSV and Feyenoord home and away.

**COACH**
**John Heitinga**
Appointed to his dream job in the summer, two years after serving as caretaker. High-press advocate.

**KEY MAN**
**Kenneth Taylor**
Ever-improving midfielder, a constant source of goals and assists. Joined the club at the age of eight.

**YOUNGSTER**
**Youri Baas**
In 12 months he has gone from good left-back to outstanding central defender. On the fringes of the Dutch national team.

**Who have they brought in to help them bounce back from last season?**
Israel attacking midfielder Oscar Gloukh, signed from Red Bull Salzburg, is an exceptional talent with a fair amount of Champions League experience for a 21-year-old. Japan's Ko Itakura, acquired for €12m from Monchengladbach, is a much underrated central defender, who also was intensively tracked by Feyenoord and Torino. The attack has also been bolstered by Raul Moro (Real Valladolid) and Kasper Dolberg (Anderlecht), while Heitinga called in some favours at former club Liverpool, with Czech goalkeeper Vitezslav Jaros and young midfielder James McConnell arriving on loan.

**Which Ajax academy graduate will be next to catch the eye in Europe?**
Aaron Bouwman, an 18-year-old central defender, impressed in pre-season with some assured performances for the first team. Lithe, intelligent and composed on the ball, he joined Ajax at the age of 11.

## ATALANTA
*The post-Gasperini era*

A wonderful nine-year era came to an end last spring when iconic coach Gian Piero Gasperini waved goodbye to the Bergamo club before taking on a new mission at Roma. One of the most influential Italian bosses of modern times, Gasperini leaves a sumptuous legacy: a thrill-a-minute brand of football based on an aggressive high press, lightning-quick transitions and swarming fast-paced attacks; the ability to turn middling players into stars and victory in the Europa League in 2023-24, the club's one and only continental trophy. Gasperini's successor Ivan Juric has an incredibly hard act to follow.

In previous spells at Roma and then Southampton, Juric had a tough time, sacked after just two months in the Eternal City and relegated from the Premier League with the Saints. Atalanta essentially chose him because he is a Gasperini disciple, having played under him for much of his professional career and serving as Gasperini's assistant at Palermo and Inter. Tactically Juric is a carbon copy of Gasperini, but does he have his human touch and charisma?

Back among the goals... Gianluca Scamacca

**Can Atalanta prosper after losing Mateo Retegui from their attack?**
Ivan Juric said that Atalanta would have lost 80-90 per cent of their goals had Ademola Lookman joined last season's Serie A top goalscorer Retegui out of the exit door this summer. But with a move failing to materialise to a rival Italian club by deadline day, and with Atalanta naming the Nigeria winger in their Champions League squad, it suggests they are expecting him to stay for now – a huge boost.

**COACH**
**Ivan Juric**
Capped five times by Croatia, he has never previously played or coached in the Champions League.

**KEY MAN**
**Marten de Roon**
Ever-reliable Dutch midfielder, who last season surpassed 300 Serie A games – no one has played more for Atalanta.

**YOUNGSTER**
**Nicola Zalewski**
The classy left-sided Poland midfielder joined from Inter in the summer in a €17m deal.

**Who will replace Retegui's goals?**
Atalanta had identified Fulham's Rodrigo Muniz as the ideal man to take over but baulked at the £50m price tag, instead opting for Lecce's Montenegro centre-forward Nikola Krstovic for €25m.

**Gianluca Scamacca's time to shine?**
In these uncertain days for *La Dea*, they desperately need the ex-Sassuolo, Genoa and West Ham United striker to stay fit and deliver in front of goal. Sidelined by ACL and hamstring injuries, he recently scored his first goal for the club in 455 days.

# EINTRACHT FRANKFURT

*Germany's best-run club*

This is the first time that Eintracht, an outstanding third in last season's Bundesliga, have qualified for the Champions League via domestic results. In their one and only previous campaign in the competition back in 2022-23, they owed their place on the starting grid to victory against Rangers in the Europa League final.

The Eagles are arguably the most well-run club in Germany at the moment, especially well-regarded for the excellent recruitment work of director of sport Markus Krosche, who, bit by bit, has assembled one of the strongest squads in the Bundesliga.

Super sub... Mario Gotze

### What is Eintracht's secret?

A handful of clubs around the continent have achieved success by developing talent, selling them for vast rewards, then starting all over again, and right now Eintracht are as good as anyone.

**COACH**
**Dino Toppmoller**
Son of Klaus, who coached Eintracht in 1993-94.

**KEY MAN**
**Ritsu Doan**
Hyperactive and technical right-sided Japan midfielder, recently signed from Freiburg.

**YOUNGSTER**
**Nathaniel Brown**
The ex-Nuremberg right-back initially struggled after joining a year ago, then sensationally found his feet.

If they have a specialism, it's goalscorers: this year, Omar Marmoush and Hugo Ekitike were sold to Manchester City and Liverpool respectively for over €160m combined inclusive of add-ons, with Randal Kolo Muani, Luka Jovic and Sebastien Haller commanding big fees in years gone by. It's early days yet, but young attackers Can Ozun and Jean-Matteo Bahoya could well be next.

### Is Mario Gotze now just a back-up?

Gotze, now 33, played a starring role in the middle of the park for much of last term, but injured his hamstring in April and took three months to recover. He is yet to reclaim his first-team spot.

# UNION SAINT-GILLOISE

*Belgium's champions*

The sight of Union clambering to the top of the Belgian pile, their first national league title since 1934-35, would have warmed the hearts of football romantics. Winners of 11 championships in the early part of the 20th century, Union then went on a long downward spiral, only returning to the top flight in 2021.

Union proved unstoppable in the six-team champions' play-off league, winning nine of their ten matches and drawing the other – a stark contrast from the two seasons prior, when they led from the start only to fumble at the finish line. Defensive dominance was at the heart of their triumph, with only three goals conceded in the play-offs.

Leading the line... Promise David

### Where will they play their home Champions League fixtures?

With their ground, the Joseph Marien Stadium in Dudenpark, not meeting UEFA requirements, USG will play host at Lotto Park (aka the Constant Vanden Stock Stadium), the backyard of capital city neighbours Anderlecht. Needless to say, Union fans are not at all happy.

**COACH**
**Sebastien Pocognoli**
At just 37, one of the youngest coaches to win the Belgian title.

**KEY MAN**
**Christian Burgess**
English centre-back who is the heart of the Union project.

**YOUNGSTER**
**Fedde Leysen**
Burgess' defensive partner, 22, is tipped to play for Belgium soon.

### How much weaker are Union in attack now that their top goalscorer, Croatia front-man Franjo Ivanovic, has left for Benfica?

In just one season with Union, Ivanovic registered 20 goals in all competitions, including 16 on their march to the Belgian league title, and he will be sorely missed. Union will be banking on Ivanovic's strike partner, the Canadian Promise David, to take up the slack. New Austria forward Raul Florucz, signed from Slovenian champions Olimpija Ljubljana, has started the new campaign well too.

# SLAVIA PRAGUE

*Back as domestic top dogs*

Czech champions once again after three seasons of near-misses, seemingly permanently ensconced as league runners-up. In truth, last term was a procession for Slavia, who only suffered three defeats and finished the campaign a whopping 16 points ahead of Viktoria Plzen in second. That was their eighth national title since the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993 and the fourth crown for their charismatic coach Jindrich Trpisovsky.

They are now back at Europe's top table for the first time since 2019-20, when they were drawn in a group of death with Barcelona, Internazionale and Borussia Dortmund.

Goalscorer...Tomas Chory

### Did club chairman Jaroslav Tvrdik speak too soon when talking about retaining all his side's top talent?

He most certainly did. That was prior to the departure of accomplished Senegal left-back El-Hadji Malick Diouf to West Ham United in a €22m deal. Diouf had come on leaps and bounds since arriving in Prague from Norwegian side Tromso 18 months ago.

**COACH**
**Jindrich Trpisovsky**
Guided Slavia to the Europa League quarters in 2020-21.

**KEY MAN**
**Tomas Chory**
Tall striker who was Slavia's leading marksman last term.

**YOUNGSTER**
**David Moses**
Athletic 21-year-old Nigerian who can play at full-back or as a box-to-box man.

### Which recruit will bring the most added value to the Slavia ranks?

Driving force midfielder and Czech national teamer Michal Sadilek, picked up from Dutch outfit Twente, will provide Slavia with bite, will-to-win and sound controlling instincts in the middle of the park. The 26-year-old made his Champions League debut while playing for PSV at Inter in 2018. Austria attacker Muhammed Cham, a loan signing from Trabzonspor, will also be one to watch.

# Play-Off Qualifiers

## BENFICA

*No longer the kings of Portuguese football*

For the fifth consecutive season, the Lisbon giants will feature in the group/league phase of the Champions League. They've made it to the knockout stages in three of the last four campaigns too, and such a run would be more than enough for a club that is no longer the undisputed big beast of Portuguese football, with only one league title in the past six seasons.

The transfer merry-go-round was spinning merrily at the Estadio da Luz this summer, with outstanding Spanish left-back Alvaro Carreras moving to Real Madrid for €50m, Turkey internationals Orkun Kokcu and Kerem Akturkoglu heading to Besiktas and Fenerbahce respectively, and legendary Argentina winger Angel Di Maria returning to Rosario Central on a free transfer.

Close to €100m was invested in new arrivals, the most expensive being Colombia midfielder Richard Rios from Palmeiras. In attack, Franjo Ivanovic arrived from Union Saint-Gilloise and Dodi Lukebakio from Sevilla, midfielder Heorhiy Sudakov joined from Shakhtar Donetsk, with young full-backs Amar Dedic and Rafael Obrador signing from Salzburg and Real Madrid respectively.

New boy... Franjo Ivanovic

### Do the Eagles have sufficient creativity in the attacking third?

Whether individually or collectively, the jury remains out. Wide attacking midfielders like Andreas Schjelderup and Gianluca Prestianni are not short of invention, but prone to inconsistency. In need of a genuine number ten with vision and finesse, Benfica turned to Sudakov just before the window closed.

**COACH**
**Bruno Lage**
Has spent 11 years coaching Benfica, working with the juniors, B team and twice as head coach.

**KEY MAN**
**Vangelis Pavlidis**
Once on the books of Dortmund, the Greece striker hit a memorable hat-trick in last season's 5-4 loss to Barcelona.

**YOUNGSTER**
**Tomas Araujo**
Accomplished 23-year-old defender, thought to be on the radar of Bayern Munich and Chelsea.

### How is Richard Rios settling in?

Perhaps inevitably for a new signing, the Colombian has had his ups and downs so far. Full of energy and tenacity when used in a box-to-box role, he has also revealed a number of weaknesses in his tactical awareness and positioning.

### Who could be their most influential player of the season?

On a season-long loan from Aston Villa, the 24-year-old Argentine anchoring midfielder Enzo Barrenechea seems to have all the bases covered: gritty, quick to sense danger, excellent in possession and with a wide passing range. Once he fully attunes to his team-mates, he should prove a fine acquisition. Spent last season on loan at Valencia.

## CLUB BRUGGE

*Rangers' vanquishers*

Full of confidence after thrashing Rangers 9-1 on aggregate in the play-offs, the *Blauw-Zwart* may yet find it difficult to repeat their Champions League success of last season, when they beat Atalanta to reach the last 16.

The off-season was a particularly heart-wrenching time for fans in the Venice of the North, with three of their best young players, winger Chemsdine Talbi, left-back Maxim De Cuyper and Belgian Pro League Player of the Year Ardon Jashari, leaving for Sunderland, Brighton and Milan respectively. Rumours were even doing the rounds that Greece winger Christos Tzolis, so influential since joining from Fortuna Dusseldorf a year ago, was also being pursued by Premier League clubs. Much to the relief of Club Brugge supporters, nothing came of the whispers and Tzolis remains at the Jan Breydel Stadium.

New faces include France U20 winger Mamadou Diakhon (ex-Reims), Germany U21 striker Nicolo Tresoldi, the former Ajax winger Carlos Forbs and Serbia U21 holding midfielder Aleksandar Stankovic.

Thrashing... Vanaken was on target v Rangers

### Was there ever a possibility of Nicky Hayen moving on this summer?

His reputation enhanced by a brilliant first 18 months as Club Brugge boss – marked by Belgian league (2023-24) and cup (2024-25) titles and no little Champions League success – Hayen was heavily linked in the off-season with clubs in England and Turkey. The 45-year-old is reportedly keen on an overseas adventure, but not yet.

**COACH**
**Nicky Hayen**
Just over three years ago, the ex-defender was managing Haverfordwest County in the Welsh top flight.

**KEY MAN**
**Hans Vanaken**
Belgian Golden Shoe winner on three occasions, the midfielder, 33, is still the man Club turn to.

**YOUNGSTER**
**Romeo Vermant**
21-year-old striker with touch, mobility and intelligence. Son of former Belgium midfielder Sven Vermant.

### In which position have Brugge made the greatest strides of late?

Probably at full-back where a couple of 20-year-olds, Kyriani Sabbe on the right and Joaquin Seys on the left, have improved out of all recognition, not only making themselves undroppable but also looking good for Belgium call-ups in the not-too distant future.

### Who is their most underrated player?

Often marked down for his supposed clumsiness, long-serving centre-back Brandon Mechele has been Brugge's rear-guard rock in over 500 games, and recently struck home a sweet volley against Rangers in qualifying.

# KAIRAT

## *Beasts from the east*

The club from Kazakhstan's largest city, Almaty, sensationally leapt over the final qualification hurdle in August, triumphing in a dramatic penalty shootout against hot favourites Celtic.

About to be seated at Europe's top table for the first time, Kairat, national champions in the 2024 campaign after edging out Astana by just one point, are the most easterly outfit in this season's Champions League, lying closer to China than Azerbaijan, home to the next-most easterly club.

Theirs is a United Nations dressing room, with players from Kazakhstan, Brazil, Georgia, Russia, Belarus, Israel, Portugal and Serbia.

Upset...Kairat at Celtic Park

**Does Kairat's location give them an advantage over their vistors?**
Opponents will face certain logistic and meteorological problems. Almaty is a good eight or nine-hour flight from Western Europe and from October onwards, temperatures in this part of Kazakhstan can drop alarmingly.

**COACH**
**Rafael Urazbakhtin**
Former Kazakhstan forward who worked as a coach for Kairat before getting the top job in September 2024.

**KEY MAN**
**Jorginho**
Diminutive and sharp 27-year-old Portuguese forward.

**YOUNGSTER**
**Aleksandr Mrynskiy**
Calm, enterprising Kazakh U21 right-back capable of switching to midfield.

**Kairat wonderkid Dastan Satpayev is due to join Chelsea when he turns 18 in the summer of 2026. Just how good is the teenager?**
He is the real deal, a prodigious talent either in his preferred role as a striker or stationed out wide on the left. Not for nothing did he make his pro debut for Kairat at the tender age of 15. Blessed with electric pace, agility, balance, sublime ball control and a natural finisher's composure, he scored three times in qualifying, all before his 17th birthday.

# PAFOS

## *Russian-backed upstarts*

Only the third Cypriot team ever to earn a ticket for the Champions League group stage – following in the footsteps of Anorthosis and APOEL – Pafos, only founded as recently as 2014, are living the Cinderella club dream after knocking out Maccabi Tel Aviv, Dynamo Kyiv and Red Star Belgrade in qualifying earlier this summer.

Under the aegis of Spanish boss Juan Carlos Carcedo, everything they have touched has turned to gold, winning the Cypriot Cup in 2024 and crowned league champions last season, a campaign in which they also reached the last 16 of the Conference League. Now they want to make a splash at the very top level.

Marquee signing... David Luiz
*Credit: Pafos FC*

**Will the veteran Brazilian centre-back David Luiz automatically start?**
Cynics might argue that the arrival of the 38-year-old former Benfica, Chelsea and PSG star is something of a publicity stunt on the part of the club's Russian owners.

**COACH**
**Juan Carlos Carcedo**
Unai Emery's former assistant at several major clubs.

**KEY MAN**
**Jaja**
The mercurial Brazilian winger scored the decisive goal v Red Star.

**YOUNGSTER**
**Alexandre Brito**
Midfielder on loan from Sporting with CL experience.

His best days probably are behind him and Pafos already have an exceptional pairing in defence in Derrick Luckassen and David Goldar, but Luiz's experience and knowhow could prove invaluable.

**What makes Juan Carlos Carcedo the right man for the job here?**
He's a workaholic and keen football analyst who pays attention to every detail of match preparation. The 52-year-old Spaniard is a cute tactician and always has a few tricks up his sleeve. Above all, he's a realist and incredibly modest. Since qualification, he's constantly spoken about the team keeping their feet on the ground.

# QARABAG

## *Second time's the charm*

If there was a trophy for the club in Europe infused with the most pride and faith in themselves, the Azerbaijani champions for the past four seasons would be a major contender. A total squad value of only €25m may be chickenfeed by the standards of the European elites, but that will not deter long-serving head coach Gurban Gurbanov and his resilient group.

This will be their second taste of the Champions League proper. In their first campaign back in 2017-18, they failed to record a single win in a group that also contained Roma, Chelsea and Atletico Madrid. A better outcome is the aim this time around.

CL return... Qarabag

**Highly-skilled Algerian number ten Yassine Benzia left in the summer for Saudi outfit Al Fayha. How difficult will he be to replace?**
In two-and-a-half years at Qarabag, Benzia proved himself a class act, and the loss of his flair and vision leaves Qarabag needing much more than a sticking plaster solution. The man with the responsibility of taking over is Kady Borges, a much-travelled Brazilian.

**COACH**
**Gurban Gurbanov**
Has ruled the roost here for 17 years and counting.

**KEY MAN**
**Marko Jankovic**
Midfield all-rounder with over 50 caps for Montenegro.

**YOUNGSTER**
**Nariman Akhundzade**
Forward, 21, already a senior Azerbaijan international.

**Has a Qarabag return revived striker Musa Gurbanli after his unsuccessful spell in Sweden with Djurgarden?**
A prolific finisher during his first stint at Qarabag, Gurbanli retraced his footsteps to rejoin the club in 2024, and hit double figures for goals and assists combined last term. He received a further boost in the recent Champions League qualifier at Ferencvaros, notching just a few minutes after coming on as a sub.

# Play-Off Qualifiers

## BODO/GLIMT

*The Arctic Circle stars*

One of four debutants in this season's Champions League – along with Pafos, Union SG and Kairat – the yellow-clad team from north of the Arctic Circle have been busy imposing a freeze on Norwegian opposition in recent times, winning four league titles since 2020.

For a substantial period, Rosenborg were the face of Norwegian football, totally dominant in the Eliteserien and good enough to reach the Champions League quarter-finals in 1996-97. But now the baton has passed to small-town club extraordinaire Bodo/Glimt, whose population (approximately 55,000) would fit into most Champions League venues with much room to spare.

Under the inspirational leadership of long-serving coach Kjetil Knutsen, the Yellows already have a European record to be proud of, progressing to the quarter-finals of the Conference League in 2021-22 and semi-finalists in last season's Europa League, where they lost to eventual winners Tottenham Hotspur. Over the course of 90 minutes in Europe, Bodo/Glimt have proved a match for anyone – just ask Roma, Celtic, Porto or Lazio, all of whom have succumbed to the northerners.

Norwegian champions ...Bodo/Glimt

**Which player will carry the biggest threat for Bodo/Glimt?**
Without doubt, the Norwegian champions are at their most dangerous when their outstanding left-winger Jens Petter Hauge is in full cry. In the 5-0 win over Sturm Graz in the first leg of the qualifying play-offs, the ex-Milan man was simply irresistible, setting up three of the goals.

**A piece of advice to adversaries?**
Try not to concede corners. Bodo/Glimt are very much set-piece specialists, with a wide range of highly-effective routines and a great deliverer of a dead ball in midfielder and captain Patrick Berg. No team scored more from corners in last season's Europa League than their six.

**Can striker Kasper Hogh repeat his form of last season when he scored seven Europa League goals?**
The Dane is certainly in a rich vein of form at the moment, top of the 2025 Eliteserien scoring charts. He's confident and knows he can rely on excellent service from those around him. His off-the-ball movement is very good and he can finish with force or subtlety.

**COACH**
**Kjetil Knutsen**
After seven years of innovative success, a move to England could be just around the corner.

**KEY MAN**
**Fredrik Bjorkan**
Attacking left-back who does a fine job of supporting and drawing attention away from chief creator Hauge.

**YOUNGSTER**
**Fredrik Sjovold**
Purposeful and tactically disciplined right-back. The 22-year-old has been a first-teamer for the past three years.

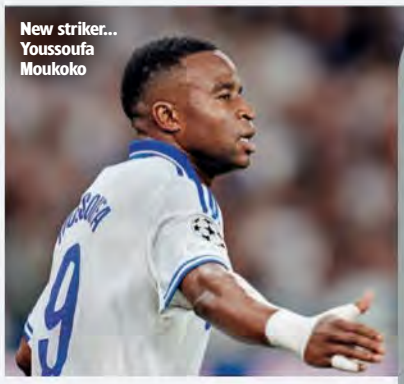
## FC COPENHAGEN

*Relying on a wonderkid*

The Danish champions' new German striker Youssoufa Moukoko, recruited this summer from Borussia Dortmund, will be having a reunion with his old team-mates earlier than he thought, with Copenhagen due to imminently host the Ruhr giants on Matchday 3. The 20-year-old unwittingly paved the way for the get-together, on target with a penalty as his new club beat Basel 3-1 on aggregate in the final qualification round.

Copenhagen clinched a record 16th domestic league title last season, just seeing off holders Midtjylland in an enthralling head-to-head contest. This is their seventh appearance in the group/league phase, eliminated early on four occasions and twice reaching the last 16, where they lost to Chelsea in 2010-11 and Manchester City in 2023-24.

Sadly for supporters, their two most marketable talents shipped out in the close season, winger Roony Bardghji moving to Barcelona and midfielder Victor Froholdt signing for Porto.


New striker... Youssoufa Moukoko

**What is their best asset as a team?**
Defensively, they are extremely well drilled, only conceding 33 goals in 32 league games last season. The unit of central defensive pairing Gabriel Pereira and Pantelis Hatzidiakos, plus full-backs Rodrigo Huescas and Marcos Lopez, has a brick-wall quality.

**Is Moukoko the answer to their goalscoring prayers?**
Absolutely. They have been in dire need of an out-and-out marksman and the ex-Dortmunder fits the bill completely. Last term, their top scorer in all competitions was right-back Kevin Diks, who amassed 11 goals – all of them penalties. He has since left for Borussia Monchengladbach in Germany.

**What are the key parts of Jacob Neestrup's coaching philosophy?**
He is a great believer in the versatility of individual players and players interchanging positions to confuse the opposition. A priority for Neestrup is to crowd the middle of the pitch with eight players, leaving just two to occupy the flanks. He sees superior manpower in the central area as the key to control.

**COACH**
**Jacob Neestrup**
In charge since 2022, he was recently linked with the vacancies at RB Leipzig and Wolfsburg.

**KEY MAN**
**Mohamed Elyounoussi**
Bright, nimble and skilful winger or second striker.

**YOUNGSTER**
**William Clem**
Tall and athletic defensive midfielder who came through the youth ranks. Denmark Under-21 international.

*All teams compiled by Nick Bidwell*

# CHAMPIONS LEAGUE: 2025-26 FIXTURES

**Tuesday, September 16**
Athletic Club v Arsenal *(5.45pm)*
PSV v Union Saint-Gilloise *(5.45pm)*
Benfica v Qarabag *(8pm)*
Juventus v Borussia Dortmund *(8pm)*
Real Madrid v Marseille *(8pm)*
Tottenham Hotspur v Villarreal *(8pm)*

**Wednesday, September 17**
Olympiacos v Pafos *(5.45pm)*
Slavia Prague v Bodo/Glimt *(5.45pm)*
Ajax v Internazionale *(8pm)*
Bayern Munich v Chelsea *(8pm)*
Liverpool v Atletico Madrid *(8pm)*
PSG v Atalanta *(8pm)*

**Thursday, September 18**
Club Brugge v Monaco *(5.45pm)*
FC Copenhagen v Bayer Leverkusen *(5.45pm)*
Eintracht Frankfurt v Galatasaray *(8pm)*
Manchester City v Napoli *(8pm)*
Newcastle United v Barcelona *(8pm)*
Sporting v Kairat *(8pm)*

**Tuesday, September 30**
Atalanta v Club Brugge *(5.45pm)*
Kairat v Real Madrid *(5.45pm)*
Atletico Madrid v Eintracht Frankfurt *(8pm)*
Bodo/Glimt v Tottenham Hotspur *(8pm)*
Chelsea v Benfica *(8pm)*
Galatasaray v Liverpool *(8pm)*
Internazionale v Slavia Prague *(8pm)*
Marseille v Ajax *(8pm)*
Pafos v Bayern Munich *(8pm)*

**Wednesday, October 1**
Qarabag v FC Copenhagen *(5.45pm)*
Union Saint-Gilloise v Newcastle United *(5.45pm)*
Arsenal v Olympiacos *(8pm)*
Barcelona v PSG *(8pm)*
Bayer Leverkusen v PSV *(8pm)*
Borussia Dortmund v Athletic Club *(8pm)*
Monaco v Manchester City *(8pm)*
Napoli v Sporting *(8pm)*
Villarreal v Juventus *(8pm)*

**Tuesday, October 21**
Barcelona v Olympiacos *(5.45pm)*
Kairat v Pafos *(5.45pm)*
Arsenal v Atletico Madrid *(8pm)*
Bayer Leverkusen v PSG *(8pm)*
FC Copenhagen v Borussia Dortmund *(8pm)*
Newcastle United v Benfica *(8pm)*
PSV v Napoli *(8pm)*
Union Saint-Gilloise v Internazionale *(8pm)*
Villarreal v Manchester City *(8pm)*

**Wednesday, October 22**
Athletic Club v Qarabag *(5.45pm)*
Galatasaray v Bodo/Glimt *(5.45pm)*
Atalanta v Slavia Prague *(8pm)*
Bayern Munich v Club Brugge *(8pm)*
Chelsea v Ajax *(8pm)*
Eintracht Frankfurt v Liverpool *(8pm)*
Monaco v Tottenham Hotspur *(8pm)*
Real Madrid v Juventus *(8pm)*
Sporting v Marseille *(8pm)*

**Tuesday, November 4**
Napoli v Eintracht Frankfurt *(5.45pm)*
Slavia Prague v Arsenal *(5.45pm)*
Atletico Madrid v Union Saint-Gilloise *(8pm)*
Bodo/Glimt v Monaco *(8pm)*
Juventus v Sporting *(8pm)*
Liverpool v Real Madrid *(8pm)*
Olympiacos v PSV *(8pm)*
PSG v Bayern Munich *(8pm)*
Tottenham Hotspur v FC Copenhagen *(8pm)*

**Wednesday, November 5**
Pafos v Villarreal *(5.45pm)*
Qarabag v Chelsea *(5.45pm)*
Ajax v Galatasaray *(8pm)*
Benfica v Bayer Leverkusen *(8pm)*
Club Brugge v Barcelona *(8pm)*
Internazionale v Kairat *(8pm)*
Manchester City v Borussia Dortmund *(8pm)*
Marseille v Atalanta *(8pm)*
Newcastle United v Athletic Club *(8pm)*

**Tuesday, November 25**
Ajax v Benfica *(5.45pm)*
Galatasaray v Union Saint-Gilloise *(5.45pm)*
Bodo/Glimt v Juventus *(8pm)*
Borussia Dortmund v Villarreal *(8pm)*
Chelsea v Barcelona *(8pm)*
Manchester City v Bayer Leverkusen *(8pm)*
Marseille v Newcastle United *(8pm)*
Napoli v Qarabag *(8pm)*
Slavia Prague v Athletic Club *(8pm)*

**Wednesday, November 26**
FC Copenhagen v Kairat *(5.45pm)*
Pafos v Monaco *(5.45pm)*
Arsenal v Bayern Munich *(8pm)*
Atletico Madrid v Internazionale *(8pm)*
Eintracht Frankfurt v Atalanta *(8pm)*
Liverpool v PSV *(8pm)*
Olympiacos v Real Madrid *(8pm)*
PSG v Tottenham Hotspur *(8pm)*
Sporting v Club Brugge *(8pm)*

**Tuesday, December 9**
Kairat v Olympiacos *(3.30pm)*
Bayern Munich v Sporting *(5.45pm)*
Atalanta v Chelsea *(8pm)*
Barcelona v Eintracht Frankfurt *(8pm)*
Internazionale v Liverpool *(8pm)*
Monaco v Galatasaray *(8pm)*
PSV v Atletico Madrid *(8pm)*
Tottenham Hotspur v Slavia Prague *(8pm)*
Union Saint-Gilloise v Marseille *(8pm)*

**Wednesday, December 10**
Qarabag v Ajax *(5.45pm)*
Villarreal v FC Copenhagen *(5.45pm)*
Athletic Club v PSG *(8pm)*
Bayer Leverkusen v Newcastle United *(8pm)*
Benfica v Napoli *(8pm)*
Borussia Dortmund v Bodo/Glimt *(8pm)*
Club Brugge v Arsenal *(8pm)*
Juventus v Pafos *(8pm)*
Real Madrid v Manchester City *(8pm)*

**Tuesday, January 20**
Kairat v Club Brugge *(3.30pm)*
Bodo/Glimt v Manchester City *(5.45pm)*
FC Copenhagen v Napoli *(8pm)*
Internazionale v Arsenal *(8pm)*
Olympiacos v Bayer Leverkusen *(8pm)*
Real Madrid v Monaco *(8pm)*
Sporting v PSG *(8pm)*
Tottenham Hotspur v Borussia Dortmund *(8pm)*
Villarreal v Ajax *(8pm)*

**Wednesday, January 21**
Galatasaray v Atletico Madrid *(5.45pm)*
Qarabag v Eintracht Frankfurt *(5.45pm)*
Atalanta v Athletic Club *(8pm)*
Bayern Munich v Union Saint-Gilloise *(8pm)*
Chelsea v Pafos *(8pm)*
Juventus v Benfica *(8pm)*
Marseille v Liverpool *(8pm)*
Newcastle United v PSV *(8pm)*
Slavia Prague v Barcelona *(8pm)*

**Wednesday, January 28**
Ajax v Olympiacos *(8pm)*
Arsenal v Kairat *(8pm)*
Athletic Club v Sporting *(8pm)*
Atletico Madrid v Bodo/Glimt *(8pm)*
Barcelona v FC Copenhagen *(8pm)*
Bayer Leverkusen v Villarreal *(8pm)*
Benfica v Real Madrid *(8pm)*
Borussia Dortmund v Internazionale *(8pm)*
Club Brugge v Marseille *(8pm)*
Eintracht Frankfurt v Tottenham Hotspur *(8pm)*
Liverpool v Qarabag *(8pm)*
Manchester City v Galatasaray *(8pm)*
Monaco v Juventus *(8pm)*
Napoli v Chelsea *(8pm)*
Pafos v Slavia Prague *(8pm)*
PSG v Newcastle United *(8pm)*
PSV v Bayern Munich *(8pm)*
Union Saint-Gilloise v Atalanta *(8pm)*

*Kick-off times are UK. Fixtures are subject to change*

Final venue...the Puskas Arena in Budapest

# Europa League preview

***Nick Bidwell*** looks ahead to the upcoming Europa League campaign

**Dreaming big...Unai Emery is Villa's best European asset**

Don't listen to those who claim that the Europa League is a second-rate event that does not inspire its participants. Just ask English FA Cup holders Crystal Palace, who released a strongly-worded statement in response to UEFA demoting them from the Europa League to the Conference League this summer for breaching multi-club ownership rules. Palace, who have never played in Europe before and are expected to miss out on £20 million in extra revenue as a result, do not regard the Europa League as an ensemble of losers. This was their big chance, now up in flames.

The new 36-team league format, which was introduced last season, has breathed fresh life into the tournament, as has the absence of group phase drop-downs from the Champions League. No longer does it have the feel of a consolation prize. It's a wholly separate tournament, an entity in its own right, and so much the better for it.

## FAVOURITES

**Aston Villa**, sixth in the Premier League last season, have an undoubted ace in the hole in the shape of manager Unai Emery, who is a past master of going all the way in this competition, three times a winner with Sevilla and once at the helm of Villarreal. Good enough to reach the Champions League quarter-finals last term, a well-structured Villa side featuring Morgan Rogers and Youri Tielemans in midfield and Ollie Watkins leading the line should go deep.

Promoted to the Europa League following Crystal Palace's administrative punishment, **Nottingham Forest** have a better class of opposition to look forward to in their first foray into Europe for 30 years. The big question, however, will be how their game plan evolves under new boss Ange Postecoglou. Forest were counter-attack kings previously under Nuno Espirito Santo, but Postecoglou's approach is altogether different and it will be fascinating to see how it all gels.

**Europa League winner...Roma boss Gian Piero Gasperini**

While **Roma's** top priority this season is a top-four finish in Serie A – thus ensuring a return to the Champions League – the *Giallorossi* are not likely to play the insouciant diva in the Europa League. Their new coach Gian Piero Gasperini won the trophy with Atalanta in 2023-24 and would dearly love to experience that top-of-the-world feeling again.

**Porto**, winners of the competition under Jose Mourinho in 2002-03 and Andre Villas-Boas in 2010-11, should be challenging for the ultimate prize too. New coach Francesco Farioli may not have proved the best fit during an abortive spell at Ajax, but is no leadership lightweight.

## IN CONTENTION

**ABOVE: Stuttgart star...Jamie Leweling**

**RIGHT: Europa League contenders...Celta Vigo and Real Betis will represent Spain**

The satisfaction of silverware can be one addictive drug, and newly-crowned German Cup winners **Stuttgart** will be looking to build on that momentum with a string of continental scalps. The Swabians play with an impressive intensity and boast a trio of excellent attackers in Chris Fuhrich, Jamie Leweling and Deniz Undav, though they will undoubtedly miss star striker Nick Woltemade following his £69 million switch to Newcastle United.

Spanish clubs boast the highest number of tournament wins in the Europa League (14) and **Real Betis**, sixth in last term's La Liga, could well be in a position to maintain the trend. The Green-and-Whites have been improving steadily season upon season, veteran coach Manuel Pellegrini is clearly pushing the right buttons, and the permanent signing of Brazil winger Antony, who enjoyed a successful spell with the club last season on loan from Manchester United, is a huge fillip.

In the northern Spanish province of Galicia, **Celta Vigo** will be dreaming of European glory too. Europa League semi-finalists back in 2016-17, they were a thoroughly entertaining proposition last season, but did lose two outstanding wingers recently (Fer Lopez to Wolves and Alfon Gonzalez to Sevilla). A deal to bring in wide-man Bryan Zaragoza, who lit up La Liga when starring for Granada in 2023-24, on loan from Bayern Munich makes a lot of sense.

## DARK HORSES

**Feyenoord**, twice winners of the UEFA Cup (1973-74 and 2001-02), are making good progress under coach Robin van Persie, who featured in attack for the Rotterdammers in two separate stints. The star attraction at De Kuip this term will be midfielder Sem Steijn, who recently arrived from Twente in a €10m transaction, a record for an incoming Feyenoord transfer. More good news was the decision of winger Anis Hadj Moussa to stay put despite reported interest from the bigger European leagues.

Despite losing a host of key players, including striker Jonathan David, centre-back Bafode Diakite, midfielder Angel Gomes, goalkeeper Lucas Chevalier and full-back Gabriel Gudmundsson, Ligue 1 side **Lille** will remain a tough nut to crack. They have a sharp-witted coach in Bruno Genesio, someone who is particularly adept on the defensive side of the ball, and their free transfer summer swoop for golden oldie French front-man Olivier Giroud already is reaping dividends. Lille certainly know how to raise their game in Europe; in last season's Champions League, they beat both Atletico and Real Madrid.

Just one Bundesliga place shy of Champions League qualification, **Freiburg** do what they always do, making light of limited financial resources and maximising the potential of the players they have. When long-serving head coach Christian Streich called it a day at the end of the 2023-24 season, some thought it was curtains. But the Black Forest collective have looked even better under the new man in charge, Julian Schuster.

**Lille new boy... Olivier Giroud**

**Feyenoord boss... Robin van Persie**

## WHO'S WHO?

- Aston Villa
- Basel
- Bologna
- Braga
- Brann
- Celta Vigo
- Celtic
- Dinamo Zagreb
- FCSB
- Fenerbahce
- Ferencvaros
- Feyenoord
- Freiburg
- Genk
- Go Ahead Eagles
- Lille
- Ludogorets
- Lyon
- Maccabi Tel Aviv
- Malmo
- Midtjylland
- Nice
- Nottingham Forest
- Panathinaikos
- PAOK
- Porto
- Rangers
- Real Betis
- Red Bull Salzburg
- Red Star Belgrade
- Roma
- Sturm Graz
- Stuttgart
- Utrecht
- Viktoria Plzen
- Young Boys

# Conference League preview

***Nick Bidwell*** on the runners and riders in the fifth edition of UEFA's newest club comp

**European debutants... Crystal Palace will play in Europe for the first time in their history**

It speaks volumes for the inclusivity baked into the concept of the UEFA Conference League that just four years after it was founded, no fewer than 51 of Europe's 55 national associations have taken part. Clubs from smaller football nations such as Armenia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Gibraltar, Kosovo and Liechtenstein used to have the continental competition door firmly slammed in their face, but thanks to the Conference League they can now revel in a brave new world of serious action and greater exposure. Suddenly, flying your country's flag in Europe is open to all.

Not that the ethos here is solely about taking part; it's also a fantastic opportunity for the less well-endowed to experience rare trophy lifts. The four winners thus far – Roma, West Ham United, Olympiacos and even Chelsea – all made their own kinds of history by triumphing. Who will become the fifth winners in Leipzig in May next year?

## FAVOURITES

The law of averages says that **Fiorentina** will go that extra yard and finally lift the trophy. Over the past three seasons, the *Viola* have consistently featured at the business end of the Conference League, twice losing in the final, to West Ham United (2022-23) and Olympiacos (2023-24), and then going close again last season, beaten at the semi-final stage by Real Betis. Newly installed coach Stefano Pioli, a Serie A winner at the Milan helm in 2021-22, is back for a second stint in the Stadio Artemio Franchi dugout and he can count on a number of quality individuals, notably strikers Moise Kean and Edin Dzeko, wing-back Robin Gosens, goalkeeper David de Gea and midfield holder Rolando Mandragora.

**Back in Florence ...Stefano Pioli**

By securing both the FA Cup and Community Shield in a historic 86-day period earlier this year, **Crystal Palace** underlined their credentials as one of the best-organised and mentally-strong sides in the English top flight. Their manager Oliver Glasner, as smart tactically as he is on the motivational front, has the players really believing in him, and that sort of implicit trust can move mountains. The Austrian certainly has the continental pedigree, having won the Europa League with Eintracht Frankfurt back in 2021-22. The recent departure to Arsenal of hugely influential attacking midfielder Eberechi Eze represented a horror scenario for the Selhurst Park faithful. But at least the south Londoners have moved quickly to fill the void, signing the talented former Villarreal winger Yeremy Pino. Keeping skipper Marc Guehi could also prove crucial.

## IN CONTENTION

ABOVE: High energy...Mainz players celebrate beating Rosenborg in qualifying

ABOVE RIGHT: Fiery atmosphere...Rayo Vallecano fans

Dutch outfit **AZ** would have been a little disappointed to only achieve a fifth-place finish in the Eredivisie last season. They have a wonderful group of young players and if the likes of Irish striker Troy Parrott, Dutch forward Mexx Meerdink and midfield all-rounder Kees Smit deliver the goods, the Alkmaar side could be in business. Smit, voted Player of the Tournament in the Netherlands' triumphant European Under-19 Championship campaign this summer, is a world-beater in the making.

The tone set by their larger-than-life Danish head coach Bo Henriksen, **Mainz** arguably are the most-improved team in Germany at the moment, always a handful for the opposition with their high-energy pressing, fast-tempo transitions and the creativity in the attacking-third of Nadiem Amiri and Paul Nebel. The one major question mark concerns the striker position. Their number one front-man Jonathan Burkardt recently left for Eintracht Frankfurt, leaving big boots to fill at the point of attack.

Back on the European football scene for the first time in 24 years, **Rayo Vallecano**, or "EuroRayo" as they are now known, definitely will not lack for motivation in the Conference League. Desire and commitment come as standard in this working-class suburb of Madrid and visiting teams can be sure of a hot reception. Watch out for the quality they possess in wide areas, the natural habitat of Alvaro Garcia, Jorge de Frutos and Fran Perez, all of whom have the happy knack of making things happen.

## DARK HORSES

**Strasbourg**, a club that has only appeared infrequently in the European arena over the past 45 years, undeniably appear to be on the up with the impressive Englishman Liam Rosenior calling the coaching tune. His team's approach, revolving around care in possession, one-on-one duels all over pitch and attacking adventure, is reaping rich dividends. In Dutch striker Emmanuel Emegha and Swedish wide-man Sebastian Nanasi, they have more than enough pace to unsettle any defence.

Historically the biggest name in Austrian football, the Green-and-Whites of **Rapid Vienna** have started the new domestic season in fine fettle and for two good reasons. Not only have they extensively strengthened on the pitch, notably bringing in DR Congo-born front-man Claudy Mbuyi from St Polten and Norwegian winger Petter Nosa Dahl from Mechelen in Belgium, they have also strengthened off it, with the highly-respected Peter Stoger taking over as coach. The ex-Cologne and Borussia Dortmund boss was part of the Rapid side that lost to Paris Saint-Germain in the 1996 Cup Winners' Cup final.

An underwhelming fourth in the Czech top flight last term, **Sparta Prague** have begun the new season in rip-roaring fashion, remaining unbeaten in their opening six league fixtures and setting up camp at the top of the table. Their Danish coach Brian Priske, back for a second tour of duty at the club, has the Maroons ticking over very nicely indeed, with Kosovo number nine Albion Rrahmani on a scorching goalscoring streak. In further good news, the highly experienced right-back Pavel Kaderabek has returned to the club after a decade in the Bundesliga with Hoffenheim.

Strasbourg boss ...Liam Rosenior

In form...Rapid Vienna

## WHO'S WHO?

- Aberdeen
- AEK Athens
- AEK Larnaca
- AZ
- BK Hacken
- Breidablik
- Celje
- Crystal Palace
- Drita
- Dynamo Kyiv
- Fiorentina
- Hamrun Spartans
- Jagiellonia Bialystok
- KuPS
- Lausanne-Sport
- Lech Poznan
- Legia Warsaw
- Lincoln Red Imps
- Mainz
- Noah
- Omonia
- Rakow Czestochowa
- Rapid Vienna
- Rayo Vallecano
- Rijeka
- Samsunspor
- Shakhtar Donetsk
- Shamrock Rovers
- Shelbourne
- Shkendija
- Sigma Olomouc
- Slovan Bratislava
- Sparta Prague
- Strasbourg
- Universitatea Craiova
- Zrinjski Mostar

# WORLD CUP QUALIFYING

An update on the Road to North America 2026 from Africa, South America, Asia, CONCACAF and Europe

Qualified...James Rodriguez celebrates against Bolivia as Colombia seal their place at the 2026 World Cup *(more on page 80)*


- **AFRICA:** Group stage qualifying latest *p79*
- **SOUTH AMERICA:** Qualifying review *p80*
- **ASIA:** Fourth qualifying round preview *p82*
- **CONCACAF:** Third qualifying round latest *p83*
- **EUROPE:** Group stage qualifying latest *p84*

# FLAWLESS MOROCCO BOOK THEIR SPOT

Heading to North America...Morocco

Morocco have not sat back on the laurels of becoming the first African side to reach the World Cup semi-finals. Since Qatar 2022, they have continued to back up their top ranking on the continent with a flawless qualifying campaign, booking an early berth at next year's finals in North America by keeping up the only 100 per cent record in the African qualifying section.

The Atlas Lions secured their place by hammering Niger 5-0 at home, and then impressively won 2-0 in Zambia with a side of fringe players.

September's seventh and eighth round of group matches also saw Tunisia book their slot for what will be a seventh appearance at the finals, after a stoppage-time goal from Mohamed Ben Romdhane away in Equatorial Guinea.

With two rounds of qualifiers left to come in October, the rest of the likely group winners are clear and only major upsets can derail Egypt, Senegal, South Africa, Cape Verde, Ivory Coast, Algeria and Ghana from emerging as the other group winners.

Only the top-placed teams in the nine groups advance to the finals, but there is a further berth available through play-offs for the four best runners-up, which offers redemption for the likes of Cameroon and Nigeria.

Cape Verde are the fairy-tale story of the qualifiers, and their 1-0 win over Cameroon in their decisive Group D clash in Praia in September means they need just three points from their final qualifiers away in Libya and at home to Eswatini. They would become the second-smallest country, after Iceland, to participate in the World Cup, but their secret has been tapping into a large diaspora on top of the 600,000 locals.

It was a superb individual 54th-minute goal from Dutch-born Dailon Livramento, who stripped Carlos Baleba of the ball in his own half before sprinting away from the defenders and slotting the ball expertly past Andre Onana, that delivered the win.

Cape Verde's other players are drawn from migrant communities in France and Portugal and they will have plenty of support if they make it to North America next year; it is estimated that there are as many people with Cape Verdean heritage on the east coast of the United States as there are in Cape Verde itself.

Other key games saw Senegal come from 2-0 down to beat DR Congo 3-2 away in Kinshasa, setting off a riot that saw most of the stadium's bucket seating ripped out by frustrated home supporters.

Sadio Mane, back involved after sitting out June's friendly win against England, played a key role in lifting his team-mates after they went 2-0 down. Pape Matar Sarr's winner three minutes from time was a thumping volley from just inside the opposing penalty area.

Draws for Egypt, Ivory Coast and Nigeria in key contests in their respective groups also boosted their chances of qualification. Egypt would have been the third African country to qualify if they had beaten Burkina Faso away, but had to settle for a goalless stalemate and a little more of a wait before they can begin their World Cup planning. Worryingly, forward Omar Marmoush picked up a knee injury.

The Ivorians kept up a one-point lead over Gabon in Group F with a 0-0 draw away in Franceville but were fortunate as Gabon struck the woodwork near the end of the game, while South Africa are ahead in Group C after a 1-1 home draw with Nigeria.

> Only major upsets can derail Egypt, Senegal, South Africa, Cape Verde, Ivory Coast, Algeria and Ghana

Senegal star ...Sadio Mane

There still, however, remains some uncertainty as to whether *Bafana Bafana* will be docked points for fielding a suspended player in March. Teboho Mokoena should have missed the 2-0 home victory over neighbours Lesotho having picked up two cautions in previous qualifiers. If points are taken away then the door could be open for Benin, although their upcoming clash in Nigeria is likely to slam it shut again.

Algeria's next game, away against Somalia and likely to be played in neutral Cairo, gives them an easy chance to top Group G. Ghana's 1-0 home win over Mali kept them on course to go to the finals as they have a three-point lead at the head of Group I, with Madagascar and Comoros still in the hunt but more than likely having to fight it out with the Malians for the runners-up spot.

Ghana centre-back Alexander Djiku scrambled the ball into the net at the back post from a Jordan Ayew corner to seal the win over Mali, but the Black Stars have been largely unimpressive throughout the qualifying campaign.

Cameroon, who have been to more World Cups (eight) than any other African side, and Nigeria could still qualify but the road is long. They need to finish among the four best runners-up, then win an African play-off tournament in November and a further inter-confederational play-off in March if they are to become a tenth African side at the 2026 finals.

*Mark Gleeson*

# COLOMBIA, URUGUAY AND PARAGUAY JOIN THE PARTY

Qualification secured...Uruguay

The final two rounds of World Cup qualifying began with three of South America's six tickets for North America already booked. The other three were duly claimed with minimal fuss. The final question, hanging over the conclusion of this marathon campaign, was who would finish seventh and grab the play-off slot? Would it be Venezuela, who would be safe if they won at home to Colombia? Or might it be Bolivia, so strong at home at the extreme altitude of El Alto? If Venezuela failed to win, they would be overtaken by a Bolivian victory over Brazil.

Perhaps the possibility of making their World Cup debut proved too much for the Venezuelans. Previously unbeaten at home, they twice took an early lead, but over-reached and collapsed, with Colombia striker Luis Suarez, making his first start of the campaign, helping himself to four goals in a 6-3 win. Bolivia, meanwhile, were given a VAR penalty, tucked away by Miguel Terceros to give them the vital victory. Not seen in a World Cup since USA '94, Bolivia will be back in North America next March for the play-off tournament. They will not be the favourites – with the exception of a shock win away to Chile, all of their

Thumbs up... Paraguay boss Gustavo Alfaro

Four-goal hero... Colombia's Luis Suarez

Heading to the play-offs...Bolivia celebrate their 1-0 win over Brazil

points came at home, thanks to the undoubted advantage of altitude – but Terceros, with seven goals in the campaign, is at the forefront of an interesting new generation.

The penultimate round had sorted out the remaining automatic qualifying places. Argentina sailed through the campaign, and said an emotional farewell to Lionel Messi, who scored two and made one against Venezuela in what will certainly be his last competitive match at home.

Ecuador had also made sure of their place, and ended the campaign with an extraordinary record of conceding just one goal in their final 11 rounds. And then there was Brazil, more solid under Carlo Ancelotti but with plenty of work ahead after suffering six defeats and finishing in fifth place.

The trio were joined by three more teams, all of whom finished level with Brazil on 28 points. After a run of six matches without a win, Colombia came through strongly at the end, seeing off Bolivia 3-0 to make sure of qualification and then celebrating with that tennis score win over Venezuela. The key question there is whether the model of playing two strikers plus James Rodriguez remains viable against stronger opposition.

Marcelo Bielsa's Uruguay also came successfully through an uneven campaign. After a flying start, they went four games without scoring a goal and managed just one win in nine before a home victory against Venezuela, and then another over Peru to clinch their place. Bielsa's hope is that, after 11 years in a Uruguay shirt, Giorgian de Arrascaeta has finally established himself in the playmaker role.

And then there is Paraguay, back at the World Cup for the first time since 2010 – something that looked extremely unlikely in the middle of last year. The first six rounds brought just one goal, and Paraguay lost all three matches at the Copa America. In came Gustavo Alfaro, the third coach of the campaign. The man in the navy suit, the low-profile Argentine, is now a national hero in Paraguay. With few changes in personnel, Alfaro's team lost just once in 12 games, and in typically solid and combative style made sure of their World Cup return with a goalless draw against Ecuador. A national holiday was duly declared.

> And then there is Paraguay, back at the World Cup for the first time since 2010 – something that looked extremely unlikely in the middle of last year

Uruguay playmaker...Giorgian de Arrascaeta

In contrast, there were plenty of tears at the final whistle for Venezuela, with the generation of Salomon Rondon and Tomas Rincon missing out on their last chance of featuring at a World Cup. Their failure to win away was a huge problem, but at least they did better than Peru, who did not even manage to score away from home. And bottom of the table were Chile, who have proved totally unable to replace their golden generation. Ten years after winning the Copa America in the USA, they will not be back.

*Tim Vickery*

Dream over... Venezuela were chasing their first-ever World Cup appearance

# SAUDIS AND QATARIS SET TO HOST FOURTH ROUND

Asia's qualification campaign for the 2026 World Cup started two years ago, but it is almost at an end. Over 30 nations know that they will have next summer free, while six are already preparing for the tournament, having booked their spots. That leaves another six competing for the last two available automatic places. They have been divided into two groups of three for October; the winners of each will go to North America, with the two runners-up starting a play-off route.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been handed hosting duties. Some thought that they would each play in the home of the other but, no, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia and Iraq will play in Jeddah while Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman will meet in Doha. Home advantage is not all. The two hosts will play games one and three, meaning they get a rest while the other two teams have to play twice in three days.

The other noticeable developments are the new faces on the bench. Five of the six teams have changed coaches this year with the other, Saudi Arabia, bringing back Herve Renard late in 2024. The contracts may be new, but some are unlikely make it to the end of the year.

Group A starts with Qatar, desperate to successfully navigate a qualifying campaign for the first time, taking on Oman. Both have made big-name coaching appointments recently. The hosts hired Julen Lopetegui in May, two months before Oman appointed Carlos Queiroz. The former has the advantage of already taking charge of two qualifiers in June, though the latter has much more experience in Asia. To add extra spice, Queiroz's last spell was with Qatar – it didn't go well and it didn't last long – and the former Real Madrid boss would love nothing more than ending their dreams in their own backyard.

> Saudi Arabia, Indonesia and Iraq will play in Jeddah while Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman will meet in Doha

Oman have never been so close, and will have to get a result and then take on the United Arab Emirates three days later. The UAE finished third in the third round, above Qatar after winning both of their games against them by an aggregate scoreline of 8-1, but now they have a new coach. For some reason, Paulo Bento was fired in March and in came Cosmin Olaroiu, the well-travelled Romanian who has had considerable success in the country. One of those three federations are going to be feeling very pleased with themselves on the evening of October 14.

Over in Jeddah, the pressure is very much on Saudi Arabia after a disappointing third-round showing.

**Under pressure... Saudi Arabia will play on home soil**

Rematch...Qatar and UAE met in the third round

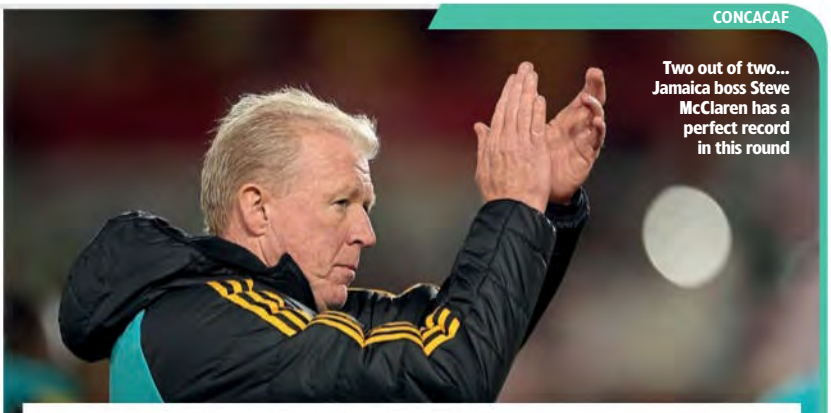
The problem was clear: just seven goals in ten games was never going to be enough for the six-time World Cup participants. Coach Renard has struggled a little in his second spell and, despite the home and scheduling advantages, there is an air of apprehension.

The first game is against Indonesia. Manager Patrick Kluivert has a team full of naturalised players born and raised in the Netherlands. Just to get this close shows how far the team has come, even if there are some misgivings at the scale and speed of change in the make-up and identity of the team. Getting to the World Cup would change all that, of course.

Then comes Iraq. The Lions of Mesopotamia messed up in March when direct qualification was within reach and, in response, they hired Australian coach Graham Arnold. The 62-year-old took the Socceroos to the second round in the last World Cup, and if he can get a talented group playing at their best then a first appearance since their 1986 debut is within reach.

*John Duerden*

CONCACAF



Two out of two... Jamaica boss Steve McClaren has a perfect record in this round

# JAMAICA OFF TO PERFECT START

The names of the CONCACAF nations joining co-hosts Canada, Mexico and the United States at the 2026 World Cup will soon be known, as the third and final round of regional qualifying began in September and will be completed by the end of the year.

It's a relatively quick turnaround to tie up these all-important loose ends now that the distractions, or preparations, of the Nations League and Gold Cup are out of the way.

By the end of the November international break, three more nations from the host region will have qualified, and two will have taken their places in the inter-confederational play-offs. The latest games, then, were all about each team giving themselves the best chance of being in the mix in a couple of months.

Steve McClaren's Jamaica are the only side to have begun this round with a perfect record, defeating Bermuda 4-0 at their opponents' national stadium in Devonshire Parish. QPR's Isaac Hayden offered some much-needed control in midfield while the goals were shared around the Reggae Boyz, even though Bermuda had more possession overall.

It was a similar story in a 2-0 victory against Trinidad & Tobago back home in Kingston, where Sheffield Wednesday's Bailey Cadamarteri (son of ex-Everton forward Danny) and Barnsley's Jon Russell scored the goals, the former's first for his country, having made his debut against Bermuda.

It leaves Jamaica in a strong position in Group B ahead of a tough away trip to second-placed Curacao, who managed to draw with Trinidad & Tobago and defeat Bermuda in their opening games. Curacao are managed by experienced Dutch coach Dick Advocaat, and are looking to become the smallest nation to ever qualify for the World Cup.

Up in Group A, another side with Dutch connections, Suriname, took the early initiative. They managed to draw at home against group favourites and Nations League runners-up Panama and then win 2-1 away in El Salvador, thanks to a well-worked team goal scored by Dhoraso Klas.

Suriname are the second-lowest-ranked team in this final round of CONCACAF World Cup qualifying, ahead of Bermuda, but have given themselves a genuine chance of reaching the finals under the coaching of former Ajax goalkeeper Stanley Menzo.

It was a disappointing start for Panama, though, who only managed to draw 1-1 with Guatemala in their other game. They are the highest FIFA-ranked team in CONCACAF outside the three 2026 World Cup hosts, and are second overall behind only Mexico in CONCACAF's own ranking system, but their early stumbles have left the group open and offered Suriname a chance to take advantage.

The standout game of these opening matches came in Group C. Costa Rica led 2-0 at half-time of their home tie against Haiti, but Duckens Nazon scored a second-half hat-trick in a brilliant turnaround for the Caribbean visitors. But still it wasn't over. In the first of seven minutes of added time, Costa Rica centre-back Juan Pablo Vargas stretched every sinew to get something on a Manfred Ugalde cross to make it 3-3 and conclude a thrilling match-up.

It was a good job for Costa Rica and their Mexican coach, Miguel Herrera, that he did, as the group favourites had only managed to draw their first game 1-1 away to Nicaragua. It leaves Group C fairly even, but Honduras sit top as the only team in it to have won a game so far, 2-0 at home to Nicaragua.

Each group is still anyone's for the taking, and we'll learn much more about these teams in the October international window, but Jamaica will be most pleased so far, especially after their poor showing at the summer's Gold Cup.

*James Nalton*

# SLOVAKIA STUN GERMANY AND SPAIN STEAMROLL TURKEY

Dominant...Spain players during their 6-0 win in Turkey

"Bratislava Humiliation". "DFB Debacle". The headlines wrote themselves as the German press told the tale of the national team's shock 2-0 defeat away to Slovakia in the opening round of fixtures in Group A. Suffering their first-ever away defeat in a World Cup qualifier, Germany were constantly outgunned by the high-intensity Slovaks, for whom forward David Strelec struck a brilliant second. Julian Naglesmann's side improved only slightly in a 3-1 home win over Northern Ireland three days later, level pegging until the final 20 minutes, when midfield goalscorers Nadiem Amiri and Florian Wirtz broke the logjam. Slovakia, meanwhile, maintained their perfect start to the campaign with a somewhat fortunate 1-0 win in Luxembourg, Tomas Rigo netting at the death.

In Group E, European champions Spain immediately turned steamroller, gaining maximum points from thoroughly one-sided road trips to Bulgaria (3-0)

Upset...David Hancko scores Slovakia's opening goal v Germany

France legend... Kylian Mbappe overtook Thierry Henry in *Les Bleus'* scoring charts

and Turkey (6-0). Their Turkish hosts, usually so resilient and combative on home turf, would have been hopeful of producing a strong underdog performance, but quickly had to contend with reality. They succumbed to their heaviest competitive defeat in six decades as Spanish midfielder Mikel Merino notched a hat-trick, his fourth, fifth and sixth goals in as many appearances for *La Roja*.

Netherlands and Poland remain the frontrunners in Group G, tied on ten points, though the Poles have played one game more. The pair recently drew 1-1 in Rotterdam and the Dutch will have felt that they missed the boat. A goal to the good after Denzel Dumfries headed in on the half-hour, the *Oranje* mysteriously went AWOL in the second half, a no-show which paved the way for Matty Cash's late equaliser for the Poles.

Following their 3-0 loss to Norway in June, Italy continued their rehabilitation in Group I, beating Estonia 5-0 in Bergamo and narrowly prevailing over Israel in a nine-goal thriller held in Debrecen, Hungary. This was the ultimate see-saw game, with Israel leading 1-0 and 2-1, Italy going 4-2 ahead and the Israelis sensationally pulling level, only for *Azzurri* midfielder Sandro Tonali to curl in a stoppage-time winner. Group leaders Norway, flawless after five rounds, thrashed Moldova 11-1 in Oslo, with Erling Haaland scoring five of them.

Everything is still to play for in Group C, where Denmark and Scotland seem particularly well placed. Thanks to a hard-fought goalless draw in Denmark and another clean sheet in a 2-0 win in Belarus, the Scots have a handy platform to build upon, as do Denmark, who swiftly recovered from a rather listless showing against Scotland to thrash Greece 3-0 in Piraeus.

Sweden, spearheaded by Arsenal's big-money striker Viktor Gyokeres, are already in trouble after picking up just one point from a possible six in Group B, drawing 2-2 in Slovenia and losing 2-0 in Kosovo. No such problems in the same pool for set-piece specialists Switzerland, who racked up comprehensive victories over Kosovo (4-0) and Slovenia (3-0).

Group J remains a three-cornered battle between North Macedonia, Belgium and Wales, the latter of whom carved out a precious 1-0 victory in Kazakhstan courtesy of striker's Kieffer Moore's first-half goal. Poor Liechtenstein, hammered 6-0 at home by Belgium, were then on the wrong end of a 5-0 North Macedonia mauling.

France took control of Group D thanks to a 2-0 "away" win against Ukraine – played in Wroclaw, Poland – and a come-from-behind 2-1 victory at home to a brave Iceland. Kylian Mbappe, on the scoresheet in both encounters, now has 52 international goals to his name, propelling him to second place behind Olivier Giroud in the country's all-time marksmanship rankings.

England's 5-0 rout of Serbia in Belgrade in Group K was doubly significant: by far the team's most impressive performance under new coach Thomas Tuchel and a huge step towards qualification. With five wins out of five and no goals conceded as yet, the Three Lions are virtually home and hosed.

The apparently ageless Cristiano Ronaldo, 40, was front and centre as Portugal began their campaign in fine style, scoring three times in total in away wins in Armenia (5-0) and Hungary (3-2). Portugal full-back Joao Cancelo proved the man of the moment against the Magyars, originating and finishing the move which resulted in his side's winning goal on 86 minutes, silencing Budapest's Puskas Arena.

*Nick Bidwell*

> Suffering their first-ever away defeat in a World Cup qualifier, Germany were constantly outgunned by the high-intensity Slovaks

**Goal fest...Israel and Italy produced a nine-goal thriller**

**Key win...England celebrate in Serbia**

DAVID LUIZ

# "I want to enjoy the adventure of playing for Pafos FC"

After leaving Arsenal for Flamengo in 2021, David Luiz's days of competing in UEFA competitions appeared to be over. But after joining Cypriot champions Pafos FC, the former Benfica, Chelsea, Paris Saint-Germain and Brazil defender is ready for his ninth Champions League campaign…

**David, this seems like a surprise move at the age of 38 – what's the reason behind it?**
For me, football is passion. I still feel the fire inside to compete and to give everything on the pitch. When the opportunity came with Pafos FC it felt right – a new challenge in a place full of energy and ambition.

**But at your age, you could now be putting your feet up on a beach in Brazil with a nice cigar…**
Maybe one day! But right now, my motivation is still the game. I love football too much to stop. I want to keep sharing my experience and also enjoy the adventure of playing for Pafos FC, an exciting project which gives me the opportunity to compete in Europe again.

**What did you know of Pafos FC?**
I knew the club was growing fast from when I met the owners Sergey [Lomakin] and Roman [Dubov]. They have big ambitions and they are doing a great job. They've been making strong steps in Cypriot and European football. When I spoke with the people here, I felt their vision immediately.

**Of course, you worked with Pafos coach Juan Carlos Carcedo at Arsenal. How important was he to your decision?**
Very important. We had a great relationship at Arsenal and I know his ideas, his professionalism and the way he works. That gave me a lot of confidence in this move.

**How impressed have you been by his coaching career up to this point?**
It's not a surprise for me as he has a lot of knowledge about the game. He has worked at top clubs and has continued to show his quality as a head coach. He has a clear philosophy and a great ability to connect with players.

**You've played for some of Europe's biggest clubs and played in some of the biggest stadiums, so will this feel strange?**
Every experience is different. Of course, I've been lucky to play in iconic stadiums but, for me, football is football. The passion of the fans is what matters, and I'm sure I will feel that here in Cyprus.

**You are a marquee signing for the club, so will that bring extra pressure?**
Pressure has always been part of my career. I see it in a positive way – it motivates me. I want to help the team and give my best for the club and the supporters, the town and the whole country.

**What do you know of Cypriot football?**
I know it has grown a lot in recent years, with teams competing strongly in Europe. There is quality here and a lot of passion from the fans.

**Looking at the teams' progress in the European competitions, it appears the quality is, indeed, getting better. Would you agree?**
Yes, absolutely. Cypriot teams have shown they can compete at a high level in Europe. That shows the progress and ambition of football here. It also shows the evolution of football around the world; clubs work hard to try to improve and develop football in their regions.

**How important will your experience be this season, especially with the side playing in the Champions League for the first time?**
Experience is always important, especially in tough competitions. I hope to bring calm, leadership and knowledge to help the team in difficult moments – but the most important thing is if everybody thinks in the same way, no matter the age.

**You have a number of Brazilians in your side at Pafos – Bruno Felipe, Jaja, Anderson Silva and Pedrao – is it important to help them with their careers?**
Of course. As an experienced player, it's part of my responsibility to support the younger ones, especially my compatriots. I want to help them grow and succeed.

**Looking further ahead, is coaching an option for you – are you taking your badges?**
Yes, coaching interests me. Football has given me so much and I would like to give something back. I am starting to prepare for that future, step by step.

**Finally, if you had to pick one highlight from your fantastic career so far, what would it be?**
It's difficult to choose one, but winning the Champions League with Chelsea [in 2012] was very special. It was a dream come true, something unforgettable.

*Interview by Luke Nicoli*

Credit: Pafos FC

SARPREET SINGH

# "Growing up it was very rare to see a player who looked like me"

Next year, the New Zealand midfielder could become only the second player of Indian heritage to appear at a men's World Cup

**What are New Zealand's realistic aims at the World Cup next year?**
It depends on who we're drawn against, but I feel getting out of our group is a genuine possibility. Maybe in the past the team has gone to a World Cup with somewhat of an inferiority complex. However, this is now a new generation of players. The majority of the first team are based in Europe. We believe we can compete with the world's leading teams. Reaching the last 32 is achievable, that should be our minimum aim.

**You were 11 years old during New Zealand's last appearance at the World Cup in South Africa 2010, what are your memories of that tournament?**
We were unbeaten in the tournament [New Zealand drew their three group matches, finishing third in their group]. The standout game was against Italy, and we came very close to beating them. To finish ahead of the defending world champions was a great achievement. That team did the country proud and were very unlucky not to progress. We now have the opportunity to go further.

**Will New Zealand be at a disadvantage given the level of opposition faced in the qualifiers? The team scored a total of 29 goals, thrashing teams like Vanuatu (8-1) Samoa (8-0) and Fiji (7-0)...**
Some of the results were crazy. You don't tend to win international games by such wide margins. We are big favourites in these matches but ultimately, we can't control who we play. Our job is to respect our opponent and not take victory as a given. At the World Cup we will be underdogs, but we can use that to our advantage. As a group, we will need to rise to the higher standards we will come up against.

**How would you rate your personal performances during the qualifying matches?**
I was happy with my contribution. I scored two goals and had several assists. In these games we have the majority of possession and that suits my style of play.

**Chris Wood is New Zealand's all-time top scorer and most recognisable player. Who else impressed during the qualifiers and can go on to make a name for themselves at the World Cup?**
Chris had an excellent season with Nottingham Forest. Many people wrongly assume that we just play the long ball [up to him], but there is so much more to his game. From my point of view, his physicality to hold the ball up allows me to make runs into the opposition box.

We are a tight group, and I don't like to pinpoint individuals but since you're pushing me, I'll give special mentions to Liberato Cacace (Wrexham) and Tyler Bindon (Sheffield United on loan from Nottingham Forest). Both are young and have the platform to showcase their ability on the biggest stage.

**Englishman Darren Bazeley manages the All Whites. Tell us about his qualities...**
The coach is big on shared leadership. He wants everyone to have their opinion heard. Any egos must be left at the door. Compared to the qualifiers, he's aware that we are likely to have less possession at the World Cup. However, he still wants us to play to our strengths and do what we are good at, even with less of the ball. Closer to the ➤

Baby faced...Singh on his full A-League debut for Wellington Phoenix back in 2017

time he will come up with the necessary tactics, once we know who is in the group. Since qualifying, his immediate message, and that of the wider football federation, is that we are not going to the World Cup to make up the numbers. We are there on merit and we shouldn't fear anyone.

**You were born in Auckland to parents from the Punjab in northern India. Next summer, you could become only the second footballer of Indian heritage to play at a World Cup, following Vikash Dhorasoo who represented France in 2006. Does that bring pressure?**

Growing up it was very rare to see a player who looked like me or shared my background playing at the highest level. As I've grown older, I've become more appreciative of the importance of representation. It's truly humbling that I'm in a position to inspire Indian and South Asian footballers in general. If you look at my socials you would think India have qualified for the World Cup and not New Zealand! The love and interest from Indian football fans and media has been incredible. There is a very big Indian community in the US and Canada and I'm pretty sure they will come out to support us.

"At the World Cup we will be underdogs, but can use that to our advantage"

Bundesliga bow ...Singh replaces Philippe Coutinho for his first Bayern appearance

**You played against India in 2018. What do you remember of that match?**
It was a unique occasion. It's not every day a footballer named Singh plays against India in India. I had to deal with a lot of media attention. It was an incredibly proud moment for my family. We won the game 2-1 and I had two assists, so naturally I was very happy with that. India are tough opponents. Sharing the pitch with Sunil Chhetri was special. He's a legend of Indian football.

**How does a 20-year-old playing for Wellington Phoenix in the A-League**

Cruising through qualifying...Singh takes on Fiji in a 2026 World Cup qualifier

Top team-mates...Singh with Joshua Kimmich, Manuel Neuer and Thomas Muller

**end up at one of the world's biggest clubs in Bayern Munich?**
I did well at the Under-20 World Cup [in Poland in 2019] and that's what impressed Bayern's scouts. It was a big move on a number of levels. The initial plan was for me to play for the reserve team, but I was fast tracked and found myself in the first team with the likes Robert Lewandowski, Thiago and Thomas Muller. Even before I made my debut for Bayern in the Bundesliga, I played against Arsenal, Real Madrid and Milan [in the 2019 International Champions Cup]. I was on the pitch with the world's best players, the biggest names in the sport. Looking back now, yeah, it does come across as extraordinary. However, you must have confidence in your ability. There was a reason they signed me. You can't afford to be too awestruck.

**Was there any player at Bayern Munich in particular who you looked up to?**
Joshua Kimmich took me under his wing. I learnt a lot from him and not just in terms of how he trained but the way he interacted with team-mates and opponents to the media and supporters. He has won many Bundesliga titles. He's a Champions League and Club World Cup winner too. He's won over 100 international caps as well. A fantastic footballer and great team-mate.

**You had highs and lows in Germany. A move to Werder Bremen fell through due to injury, your time at Jahn Regensburg was restricted due to an admin error, and then you were released by Hansa Rostock after they were relegated. How did you overcome those hurdles?**
The gap between the reserves and first team is a very big one, and that's not just at Bayern but for the Bundesliga in general. There is only so much you can learn at that level. To progress I had to look at moves away, even if they were loans, but nothing went smoothly. My career was on hold. I would get myself in shape, get a consistent run of games and then something unexpected, out of my control would happen and it was back to square one. It was very tough especially when your family is on the other side of the world. Over time facing adversity, you realise a level of resilience you didn't know you had.

*Interview by Imran Azam*

Olympian...Singh in action for New Zealand against hosts France at the 2024 Paris Olympics

Glenn Moore

# Arsenal gunning for WSL title

## The European champions are determined to knock Chelsea off their WSL perch

Having conquered Europe, including the apparently unbeatable Barcelona, can Arsenal now conquer England and the actually unbeatable – domestically at least – Chelsea?

That was the big question at the start of the new WSL season, and if Arsenal fail to end Chelsea's run of six successive titles it won't be for lack of effort.

The Gunners, benefiting from having the highest average attendance of any women's team in the world, made Olivia Smith the first £1 million women's footballer after signing her from Liverpool, and turned Chloe Kelly's hugely effective loan move from Manchester City into a permanent deal. In fact, their attacking options are so strong that they allowed Michelle Agyemang, the breakout star of Euro 2025, to return to Brighton for another season on loan.

Chelsea, having already spent big to sign Naomi Girma and Keira Walsh in January, responded by bringing in Angel City's US striker Alyssa Thompson for a fee on a par with Smith's £1m, and with add-ons that could push it higher. Sonia Bompastor also went back to OL Lyonnes for Australia full-back Ellie Carpenter, with Ashley Lawrence going the other way. After an injury-hit two years, Mia Fishel has gone to Seattle Reign but Sam Kerr, 20 months after suffering an ACL injury, appears to be back to fitness.

Bompastor had a sensational debut season with Chelsea. The west London club were unbeaten domestically, winning 27 and drawing three of their 30 games, earning them the treble. However, they lost home and away in the Champions League semi-finals to Barca, and Europe is likely to be the focus for many this season: the fact Bompastor won it as a player and coach was a factor in her hire.

The only serious challengers to these two should be the Manchester clubs, both of whom recruited from Bayern Munich: Germany's Sydney Lohmann to City and Julia Zigiotti Olme to United, who have also signed fellow Swede Fridolina Rolfo. More interesting was the switch that saw England stars Grace Clinton and Jess Park swap clubs. On balance, Clinton's City, with injured players returning and no European commitments, look the stronger.

> The Gunners made Olivia Smith the first £1 million women's footballer after signing her from Liverpool

There are a couple of other intriguing plotlines in the WSL. One is the return of Gareth Taylor, who left Manchester City after nearly five years in March, as manager of a Liverpool side that seems to oscillate from ambition to making-do.

The other is Michele Kang's London City Lionesses, the first truly independent club in the top flight, and one that intends to make a real impact.

In each of the past two seasons the promoted club has gone straight back down, but King aims to do more than just buck the trend with over a dozen signings, the most eye-catching of which was France midfielder Grace Geyoro from Paris-Saint Germain for a fee originally reported to have broken the world record, though LCL later dampened those claims. Other signings include veteran English forward Nikita Parris (Brighton), former Arsenal midfielder Danielle van de Donk (OL Lyonnes), Italy stalwart Elena Linari (Roma), Barca youngsters Lucia Corrales and Jana Fernandez and, from Angel City, Australia's Alanna Kennedy and former Manchester United captain Katie Zelem.

The top two teams in the re-rebranded WSL2 will come up this season, with a third playing off against the bottom WSL club, a one-off expansion sparking a frenzy in the lower tier.

Crystal Palace, seeking an immediate bounce-back, have brought in former Rangers boss Jo Potter as manager and signed Belgium's Justine Vanhaevermaet (Everton) while Bristol City, relegated the previous year, recruited Sophie Ingle (Chelsea) and Vicky Losada (Brighton).

Birmingham, now under American ownership, have made a statement signing in goalkeeper Adrianna Franch (Kansas City Current), while another former US international, two-time World Cup winner Morgan Gautrat (nee Brian), has joined equally ambitious Newcastle United on loan from Orlando Pride. There she'll partner ex-England midfielder Jordan Nobbs (Aston Villa) with Republic of Ireland's Aoife Mannion (Manchester United) also joining.

**Record-breaking deal...new Arsenal star Olivia Smith**

**WSL holders... Chelsea began their title defence with a 2-1 win over Manchester City**

# Round-up

### REST OF EUROPE KICKING OFF

In France, Michele Kang has maintained her investment in OL Lyonnes, where there has been a major overhaul in playing staff to lower the age profile. Besides losing Geyoro to London City Lionesses, rivals Paris Saint-Germain have also been raided for France striker Marie-Antoinette Katoto and American Korbin Shrader (nee Albert). Germany forward Jule Brand (Wolfsburg), Brazilian defender Tarciane (Houston Dash) and Dutch starlet Lily Yohannes (Ajax) have also signed along with the experienced Ingrid Engen (Barcelona) and Lawrence.

In response, PSG have signed Nigeria's Rasheedat Ajibade (Atletico Madrid) and Spain's Olga Carmona (Real Madrid), but lost Lieke Martens to retirement as well as Geyoro, Katoto and Shrader.

In the circumstances, it is hard to see beyond OL Lyonnes retaining their title – but surely at some point, with the new play-off system, someone will eventually dethrone them?

In Spain, there's much speculation of cost cutting at Barcelona, with *La Roja* defender Laia Aleixandri their only signing on a free transfer from Manchester City. The financial problems at the parent men's club are well known, but the women's team is understood to turn a profit and imperilling their potential in Europe would seem counter productive.

At home, Barca should still be supreme. Real Madrid, the only feasible challengers, have recruited two Germans, goalkeeper Merle Frohms (Wolfsburg) and midfielder Sara Dabritz (OL Lyonnes), plus Sweden starlet Hanna Bennison (Juventus) and Denmark full-back Sara Holmgaard (Everton). But the opening day, when Barca thrashed one promoted team 8-0 while the other held Madrid to a draw, did not auger well.

**Influential...Michele Kang, owner of OL Lyonnes and London City Lionesses**

In Germany, Eintracht Frankfurt will hope to challenge Bayern Munich and Wolfsburg, both of whom have suffered a number of departures. Frankfurt have brought in several new players, including Australia forward Hayley Raso (Tottenham Hotspur) and Sweden defender Amanda Ilestedt (Arsenal), but lost Germany internationals Sara Doorsoun (Angel City) and Sophia Kleinherne (Wolfsburg).

In Italy, champions Juventus have shuffled the pack with notable departures including Valentina Bergamaschi (Roma), Alisha Lehmann (Como) and Lisa Boattin (Houston Dash). Headlining the arrivals are Portugal's Tatiana Pinto (Atletico Madrid) and Italy's Michela Cambiaghi (Inter).

The attention will initially be as much on the stands as the pitch though, with high hopes that *La Azzure's* run to the Euro 2025 semi-finals will spark a boom in interest among public and media. With good timing, Serie A Femminile has expanded from ten to 12 clubs.

In an intriguing development, the league will adopt Football Video Support, a system similar to VAR but using fewer resources. Coaches can request a review of key decisions by the referee at a pitchside monitor. After two unsuccessful challenges, a coach's match quota is used up.

With Spain's Liga F also adopting the system this is one area in which the WSL lags behind, the league so far resisting technology arguing the cash is better spent on funding referees and their training.

**Record signing... Lizbeth Ovalle (L) with new team-mate Stephanie Ribeiro**

### WUHAN LAUNCHES FIFA WOMEN'S CHAMPIONS CUP

The first round of the new FIFA Women's Champions Cup will take place in China in October with Asian confederation champions Wuhan Jiangda hosting their Oceania equivalents Auckland United.

The victors will progress to meet the winners of the African Champions League, the final of which is on November 23, in December.

The successful team will then face European champions Arsenal as part of a four-team climax from January 28 to February 1 at a neutral venue. The other semi-final will feature CONCACAF winners NJ/NY Gotham FC and the Copa Libertadores champions.

**South American champions... Corinthians**

### ARGENTINA HOSTS COPA LIBERTADORES

Speaking of the Copa Libertadores, Brazilian outfit Corinthians will be seeking a third successive South American crown and sixth overall when the 17th edition kicks off in Argentina on October 2. The 16-team event, which concludes with a final in Buenos Aires on October 18, is yet to be won by a club from the host nation.

Corinthians, with Copa America winners Duda Sampaio, Vitoria Yaya and Jhonson, plus veterans Andressa Alves and Tamires, will again start as favourites. Fellow Brazilian entrants Sao Paulo, making their debut, and two-time winners Ferroviaria are among their likeliest challengers, along with 2022 finalists Boca Juniors.

### PRIDE BREAK THE BANK FOR OVALLE

In between Arsenal signing Olivia Smith, and Alyssa Thompson and Grace Geyoro joining Chelsea and London City Lionesses respectively, Orlando Pride paid Tigres UANL $1.5m (£1.1m) for 25-year-old Mexican winger Lizbeth Ovalle.

Nicknamed *La Maga* (The Magician), Ovalle has been a Mexico international since she was 18 and averages a goal every three games for *El Tri*.

Elsewhere in the NWSL, Washington Spirit signed Juventus' Sofia Cantore, who impressed with Italy at Euro 2025.

### FOUR BIDS FOR EURO 2029

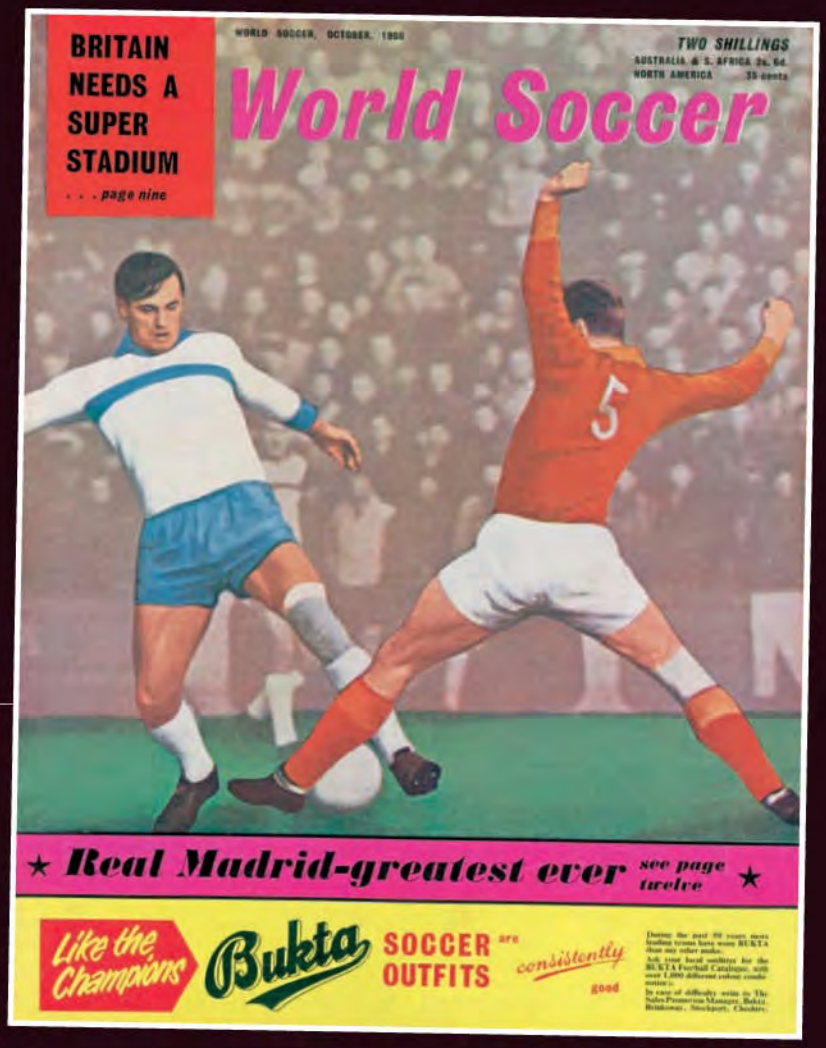
Four bids from countries have been submitted to host the next European Championship, in 2029: Germany, Poland, Portugal and a joint Sweden-Denmark offer, while Italy withdrew. UEFA will select the hosts on December 3.

Poland and Portugal have never hosted, Sweden and Germany last did so in 2013 and 2001 respectively, and Denmark staged what was then a four-team event back in 1991.

# 65 YEARS OF... World Soccer®

GLOBAL FOOTBALL SINCE 1960

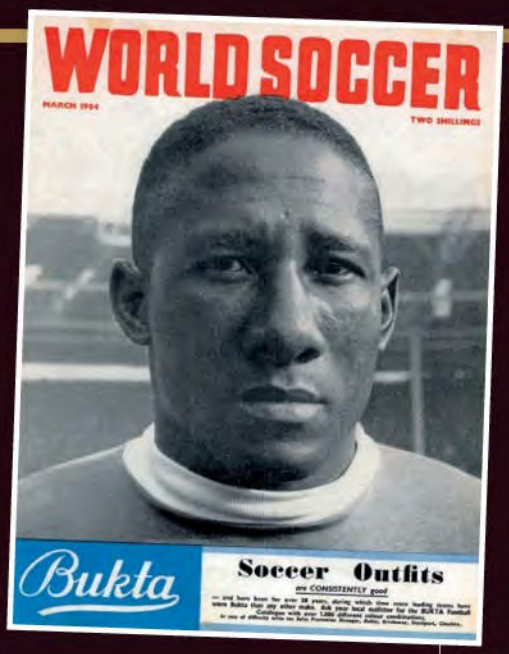
To mark the 65th anniversary of *World Soccer*, we've dived into the archives to pick out our favourite front covers from the magazine's six-and-a-half decades…




**October 1960 ▶**

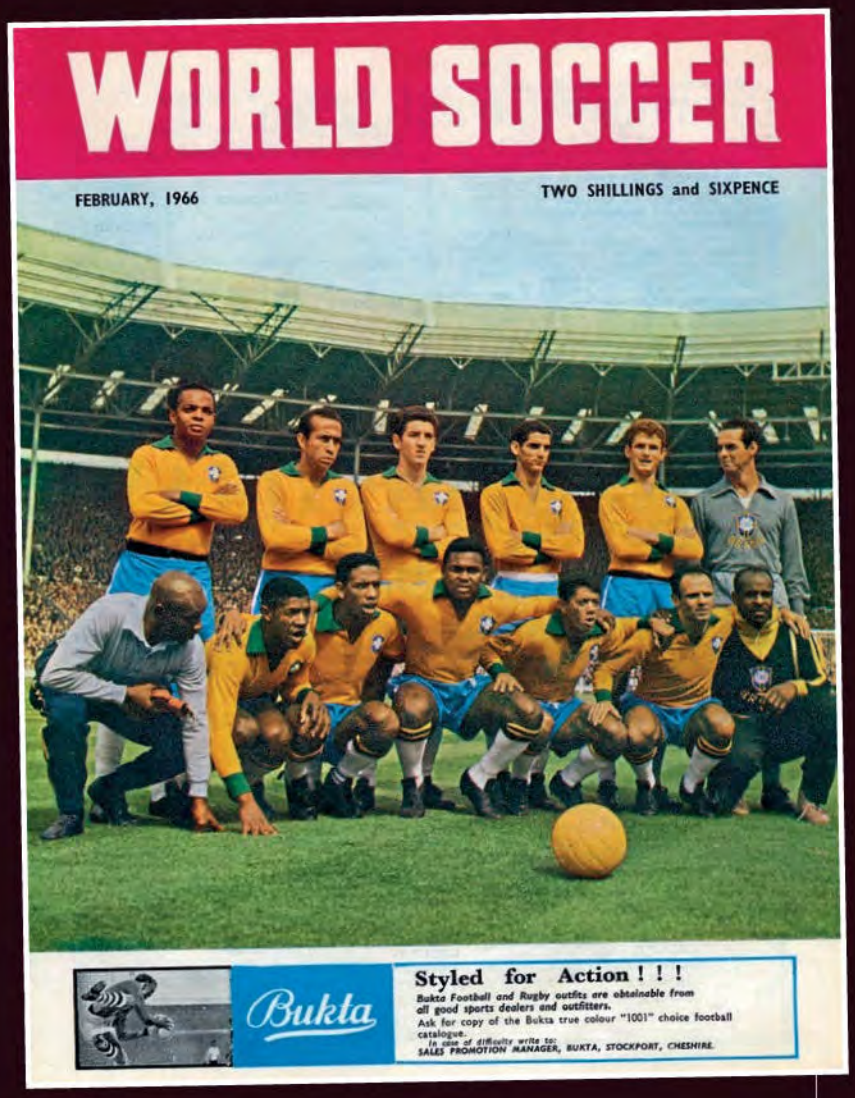
This is the cover of the first-ever edition of *World Soccer*, released almost exactly 65 years ago. The features inside included an article on Real Madrid – whose famous 7-3 victory over Eintracht Frankfurt in the European Cup final at Hampden Park just a few months earlier had inspired the need for an internationalist football publication – Britain's need for a "super stadium", a player portrait of then "boy wonder" Pele, and a poster of Chelsea and England striker Jimmy Greaves.

*The first year of* **World Soccer**



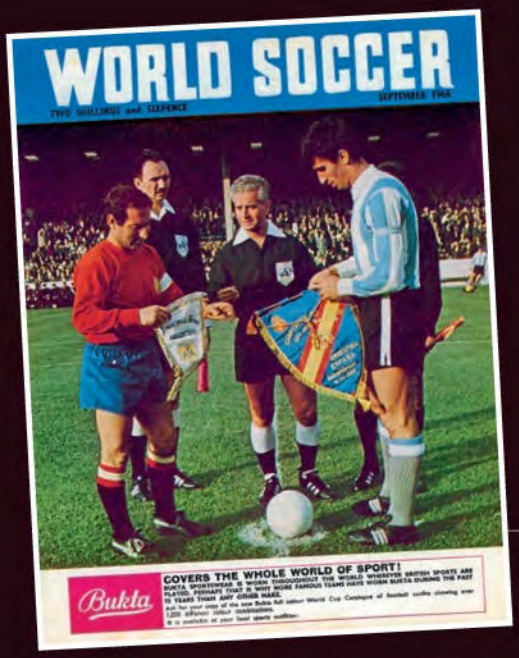

▲ **March 1964**

For the first three-and-a-half years, the majority of *World Soccer's* front covers would feature an action photo from a game. But the March 1964 cover broke the mould with a portrait of Brazil full-back Djalma Santos, taken ahead of the England v Rest of the World match at Wembley a year earlier to celebrate the FA's centenary.




▲ **February 1966**

Team photos eventually became a regular choice for front cover images, but the first side to feature on such a cover was Brazil in February 1966. It is difficult to think of a more iconic combination than the *Selecao* at Wembley, taken ahead of their 1-1 draw with England in 1963. The players featured were (back row left to right): Lima, Zequinha, Dias, Rildo, Eduardo, Gylmar. (Front row): Dorval, Mengalvio, Coutinho, Amarildo, Pepe.




◀ **September 1966**

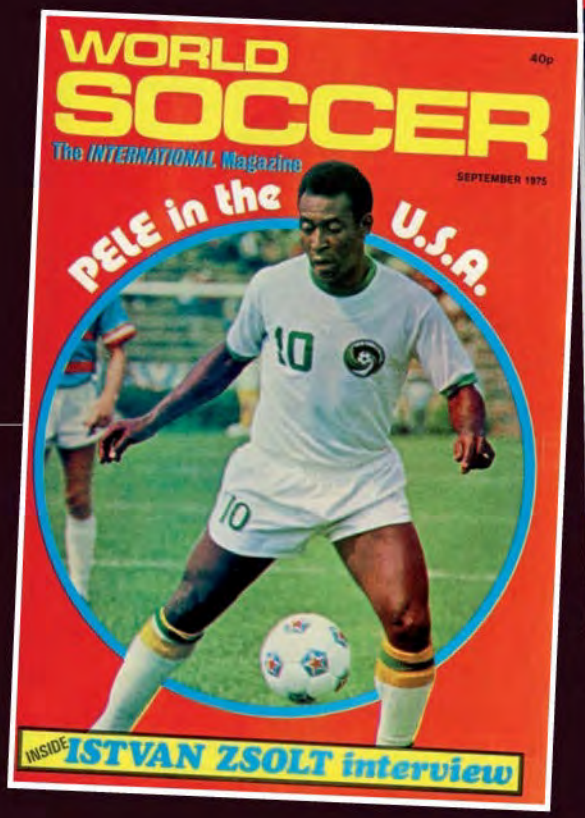
In keeping with *World Soccer's* international outlook, the review of the 1966 World Cup was led not by a celebratory picture of Bobby Moore lifting the Jules Rimet trophy at Wembley but the Spain and Argentina captains, Paco Gento and Antonio Rattin respectively, shaking hands ahead of their group stage meeting at Villa Park.

▲ **November 1971**

In an edition that raged against spiralling transfer fees, Steve Kember, who had just joined Chelsea for a fee of £170,000, graced the front cover alongside the line, "Transfers: Has football gone mad?" Ironically, this was the first issue priced at 20p, an increase from 15p the month before.

◀ **July 1974**

The first front cover to feature two African teams came in 1974, with this chaotic photograph from a World Cup qualifying clash between Zaire (now DR Congo) and Morocco. The caption wrongly described it as taking place at that year's Africa Cup of Nations, which Zaire won and Morocco didn't qualify for.

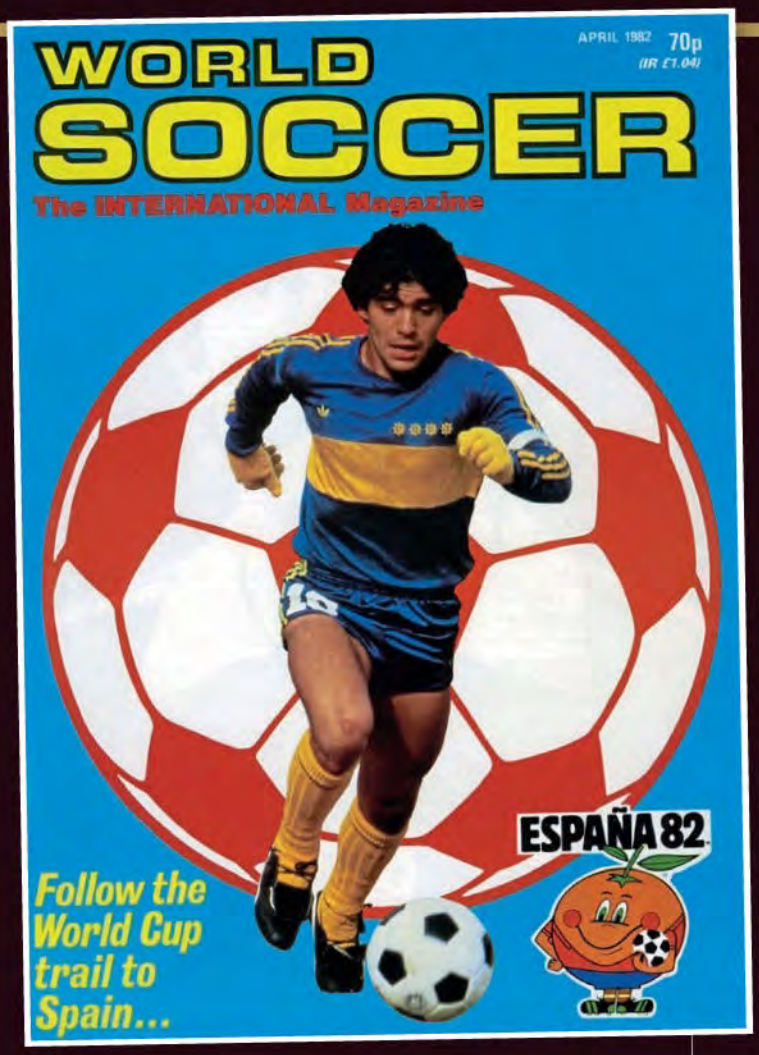



▶ **September 1975**

An iconic photo of an iconic player making an iconic transfer topped the billing in September 1975, but this was also a bold design for its time, with Pele bursting out of a circle rather than just a simple photograph.

▲ **February 1977**

A photo that captures the essence of the era: the ball itself has just left the frame, cleared away by Ipswich Town's No.6, Kevin Beattie, while Leeds United's Gordon McQueen and Joe Jordan watch on – with absolutely everybody caked in mud and drenched with rain.




## ▲ April 1982

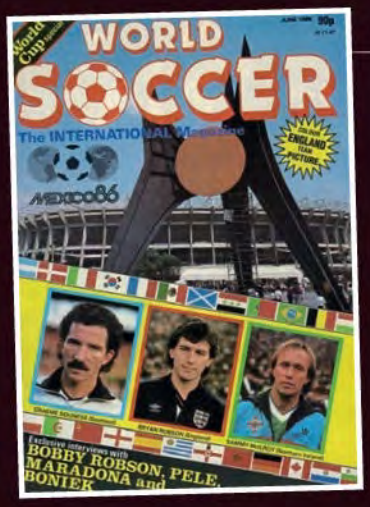
Whether in the colours of Boca Juniors, Barcelona, Napoli or Argentina, Diego Maradona was, unsurprisingly, a regular cover star throughout the 1980s. This was his *World Soccer* debut, back when he was still just a promising one to watch ahead of that summer's World Cup. "When he first came on the scene he looked to have a fantastic future," says Eric Batty of Maradona later in the magazine, "but now there are numerous question marks hanging over his head."

## ▶ December 1982

A genuinely landmark issue of the magazine, with the inaugural *World Soccer* World Footballer of the Year award being launched. As you can see, the first-ever prize winner was Italy's World Cup hero of that year, Paolo Rossi. The award continues to go strong up to this day.

## ◀ June 1985

Perhaps the most tragic edition of *World Soccer* in the magazine's history. The front cover acknowledging the Bradford City stadium fire had already been designed when the news came through of the Heysel Stadium disaster in the 1985 European Cup final between Liverpool and Juventus.




## ◀ June 1986

A bold design promoted the 1986 World Cup preview, with the stars of the British teams heading to Mexico in front of the Azteca. The mid-1980s also saw a re-design of the logo, with a football replacing the O in Soccer.

## ▶ December 1988

A defining year for Dutch football, with the national team winning that year's European Championship thanks to coach Rinus Michels and star striker Marco van Basten. The triumph was celebrated appropriately with this front cover, as the country took a clean sweep in that year's *World Soccer* awards.

## ▶ March 1990

Arguably one of the most distinctive-looking footballers of all time, Carlos Valderrama and his trademark afro led the build-up to Italia '90, shortly after helping his country Colombia qualify for the finals via the inter-confederational play-offs.

## ▼ April 1995

A sign of the changing times, with the use of one striking photograph for the cover becoming a thing of the past. This was also a fine example of *World Soccer's* record of highlighting rising stars, not only with Juventus' breakout hero Alessandro Del Piero but also Real Madrid's emerging starlet Raul.

## ▲ July 1998

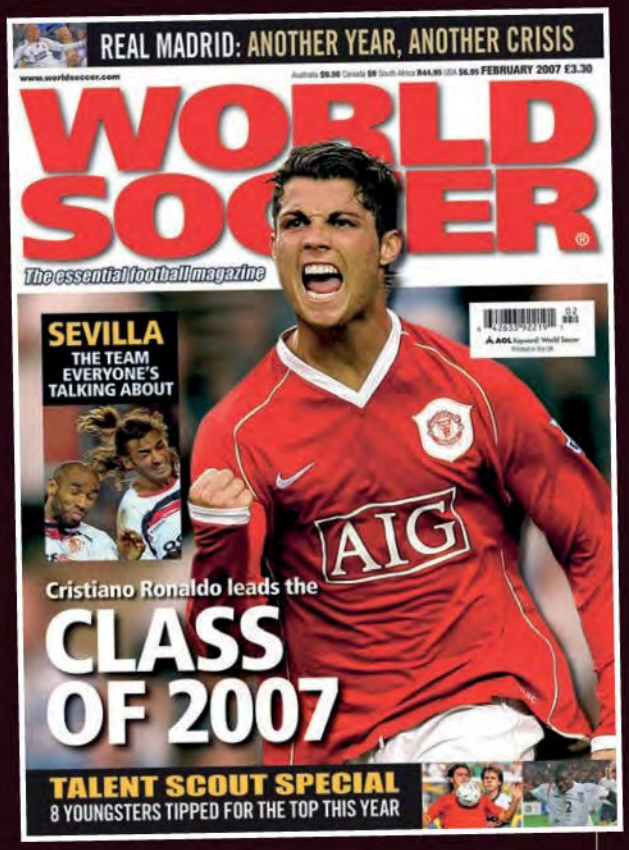
The 1998 World Cup preview kept it simple: no players, no flags and very little colour, just the FIFA World Cup trophy in all its glory and the promise of a comprehensive guide to the upcoming finals in France.

## ▶ January 1997

Another player that would become a staple of *World Soccer* front covers, Ronaldo adorned this issue after being named World Player of the Year for 1996. The Brazilian superstar was back a year later after winning the award yet again.

## ◀ January 2006

Some players just make for perfect cover stars and Ronaldinho, wearing the iconic Brazil No.10 shirt and with an expression of pure joy, undoubtedly fits into that category. Here he is being named *World Soccer's* Player of the Year for the second time in a row.

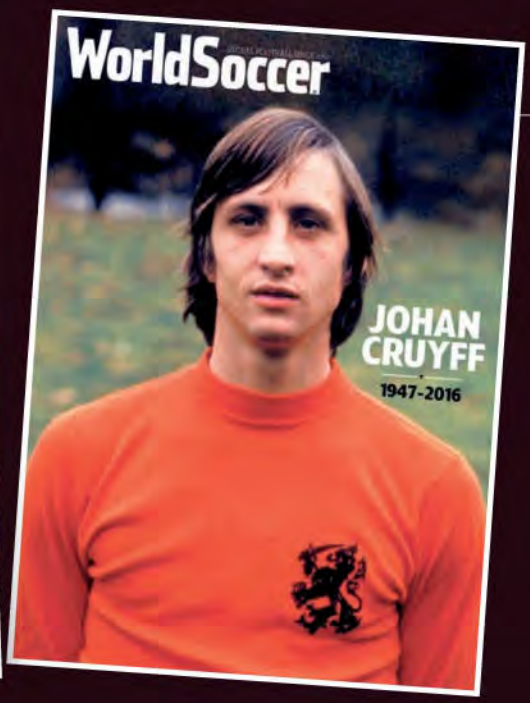


## ▲ ▶ February 2007 & June 2007

No reflection on the last few decades of football would be complete without a mention for these two. Lionel Messi had adorned the front cover in November 2006 alongside fellow Argentina wonderkids Javier Mascherano and Carlos Tevez, but less than a year later he'd become worthy of taking sole spot. By then, Cristiano Ronaldo, enjoying the first genuinely elite season of his career on his way to helping Manchester United win the Premier League title, had already been front and centre just a few months earlier.

## ◀ ▼ June 2016

Occasionally, two events collide that each demand their own covers – and June 2016 was one such occasion. On the front, amid Britain's debate on its own European future, the upcoming European Championship was previewed; on the back, there was a tribute to the late, great Johan Cruyff, who had passed away in March of that year.



## ◀ July 2010

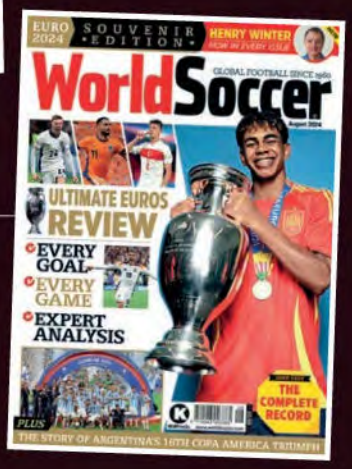
The crowning achievement of one of the finest international sides of all time, the story of Spain's victory at the 2010 World Cup in South Africa was told in this edition.

## ◀ July 2018

This is one of those covers that will inevitably be dug out in the future when we're reflecting on the career of a legendary player, as a teenaged Kylian Mbappe kisses the trophy after helping France win the 2018 World Cup in Russia.

## ▶ February 2023

Few players have adorned the front cover of *World Soccer* more often than Pele, with his first appearance coming in January 1961. Sixty-two years later he made his final appearance, shortly after his death.




## ▶ August 2024

Like the Mbappe cover six years earlier, Lamine Yamal clutching the European Championship trophy after helping Spain beat England in the final was an instant classic.

*From the publishers of* **WorldSoccer**

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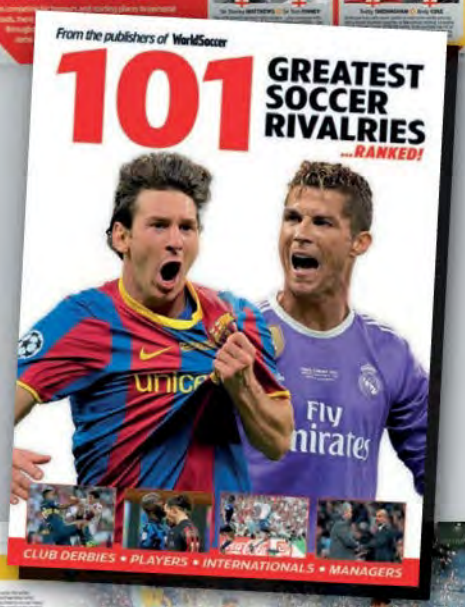

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United States



JAMES NALTON

Review

# Sounders add Leagues Cup to trophy collection

## Homegrown planning beats star power as Brian Schmetzer's side see off Inter Miami in another all-Major League Soccer Leagues Cup final

Seattle Sounders confirmed their status as one of the pre-eminent teams not only in MLS but in US professional soccer, defeating the much-fancied Inter Miami in the 2025 Leagues Cup final.

It completed a collection of North American trophies for the Sounders, with this latest silverware being added to the MLS Cup, Supporters' Shield, US Open Cup and CONCACAF Champions Cup titles claimed in previous seasons. And the manner in which they went about this latest triumph summed up what has made them consistently successful.

For the Leagues Cup itself, it was another tentative move forward as the organisers try to get the balance right in this MLS versus Liga MX competition. There are still controversies surrounding it, not least the tournament being played entirely on MLS soil, which puts Liga MX teams at a disadvantage from the get-go.

As the final approached, though, there was only excitement around two high-profile American teams whose approaches to the sport are at opposite ends of the spectrum. One is a team whose name straddles the history of American professional soccer, from the NASL of the 1970s and 1980s to USL at the turn of the century and MLS from 2009 onwards. The other was founded in 2018 around celebrity names, such as co-owner David Beckham and later star player Lionel Messi, in a celebrity city. One is a team that builds from the foundations, complementing homegrown talent with astute signings. The other gets the star names first, then works out the rest from there.

This demonstration of what the Sounders franchise is all about began ahead of the game when their head coach, Brian Schmetzer, issued a sound bite that will go down in team folklore: "Messi is arguably the best player the world has ever seen, but we have Paul Rothrock."

On matchday, Seattle offered anyone wearing a "Messi 10" Inter Miami shirt the opportunity to swap it for a "Rothrock 14" Sounders shirt. Many took them up on the offer and saw their new hero score the third of the Sounders' three goals in the game, rounding off this particular sub-plot with a jubilant ending. Rothrock's smile beamed as he was subbed with seconds to go, receiving the adulation of a sold-out crowd.

Seattle's game plan nullified Inter Miami's star power in what was both a showcase and a justification of their overall strategy. They were missing several key players, but their underlying processes meant those stepping in did so seamlessly. Many of them, including all three goalscorers, were either from Seattle or had spent time with the team's academy or their development club, Tacoma Defiance. Schmetzer himself played for the Sounders in the NASL in the early '80s.

Inter Miami had over 60 per cent possession, but the Sounders gave them no peace on the ball. Alaska-born Mexico international Obed Vargas, who also spent a season with Tacoma Defiance in 2021, was omnipresent in defence for the hosts.

They thwarted Messi by following his runs rather than his passes, blocking his influence, just as the NFL team who play in this stadium, the Seattle Seahawks, might run a blocking scheme in their version of football.

Frustrated, the Inter Miami players' behaviour at the final whistle left a lot to be desired. Amid a post-match melee, Luis Suarez appeared to spit in the face of Seattle's head of security, Gene Ramirez, and Sergio Busquets struck Vargas on the chin.

It was a messy ending to a dramatic final in a tournament that can, at times, be uneventful.

Following some uninspiring intra-league match-ups in previous years, this year's edition went big on MLS versus Liga MX match-ups, devising a format that guaranteed inter-league games all the way up until the quarter-finals.

However, at the first opportunity for it to be so, it turned into a one-league affair as each MLS team triumphed against their Liga MX opposition in the last eight.

They were all narrow victories, with two of them decided on penalties, but they were MLS victories all the same, which led to all-MLS semi-finals for the second consecutive year.

The Sounders saw off LA Galaxy with a relatively comfortable 2-0 win, but Inter needed some Messi magic to overcome Orlando City. Trailing 1-0 at half-time, the Argentine scored twice in the last 13 minutes to turn the game around.

The final had a fitting venue in Seattle's impressive Lumen Field, which is likely to emerge as one of the more popular venues at next year's World Cup. Despite being an NFL stadium, it adapts well to soccer, as this final showed, with 69,314 spectators setting a new attendance record both for the tournament and for a sports event at the stadium.

A good number of those in the stands were wearing the pink of Inter Miami, but there was no doubt that this was a Sounders home game, secured courtesy of finishing top of the MLS section of the tournament's group stage. The goals from Osaze De Rosario, Alex Roldan and Rothrock produced a convincing scoreline and proved beyond doubt that Seattle were the best team in this competition.

> "Messi is arguably the best player the world has ever seen, but we have Paul Rothrock"
>
> Seattle Sounders head coach Brian Schmetzer

The Leagues Cup also offers three qualification places for next year's CONCACAF Champions Cup, and the two finalists were joined by LA Galaxy, who defeated Orlando City 2-1 in the third-place game.

Mexican clubs and especially their fans feel aggrieved, understandably so, that MLS teams have home advantage in a tournament that offers so many Champions Cup spots.

But even if the tournament itself doesn't get everything right, the Sounders did. From Rothrock taking Messi's spotlight to the team's performance and approach, they remain an example to follow in American soccer.

Local hero... Sounders star Paul Rothrock

Silver medallist ...Messi watches the trophy lift

Kenya Tanzania Uganda

MARK GLEESON

# Morocco and Madagascar play out CHAN final thriller

## Tournament for African-based players justifies its existence with entertaining and useful edition in East Africa

It took an extraordinary goal to settle what turned out to be an extraordinary tournament, even though doubts remain over the usefulness of the African Nations Championship (CHAN) and, indeed, its long-term future.

The tournament, originally scheduled for the start of the year, was due to be scrapped. But a change of heart from Confederation of African Football (CAF) president Patrice Motsepe brought it back to life, largely to test the facilities of the three East African countries due to host the 2027 Africa Cup of Nations finals.

Work on stadia refurbishment and other logistical requirements was proving torturously slow, particularly in Kenya, but Tanzania and Uganda also needed the hurry-up that hosting the CHAN two years ahead provided.

In the end, it was all a bit of a last-minute scurry. But there can be no doubt that the Nations Cup after Morocco later this year is headed to virgin territory in the form of the three East African neighbours.

Initially, there were several countries who did not even bother to enter the qualifying stages, but Motsepe persuaded the likes of Egypt and South Africa to change their minds and allowed a late qualifying competition for them to try to reach the finals.

South Africa qualified, but their misfit team makes something of a mockery of the tournament, which is for home-based players only. The fact that the tournament does not fall into a FIFA window, combined with the start of the new domestic league season, meant that South Africa sent a squad of players either out of contract or surplus to club requirements. The fact that this motley crew proved competitive is an indictment on the quality of the event, and the fact that the results are also taken into account for the FIFA world rankings is palpably wrong.

But that aside, this CHAN did serve a purpose and provided a reminder of one of the key reasons it was introduced in the first place: to offer a bigger stage to footballers still playing on the African continent and to offer more international competition to countries whose national teams have little budget for friendlies.

And that is what made this CHAN edition a success, as Madagascar made it all the way to the final, confounding expectations and proving some of the continent's lesser lights can contest for silverware.

In recent years, the makeup of the national team has changed as successive coaches have gone out of their way to find players with Malagasy heritage in Europe, to the detriment of the home-based talent. Therefore, the progress of this group of islanders all the way to the final was remarkable and it was fitting that even after they lost 3-2 late in the decider in Nairobi to Morocco, they got a six-hour tickertape parade when they got back to Antananarivo.

Madagascar got off to a bad start, drawing their first group game 0-0 with Mauritania and then losing 2-1 to co-hosts Tanzania. But they bounced back with victories over the Central African Republic, participating in their first major tournament, and Burkina Faso to take second spot in Group B. There followed two dramatic knockout-round games, edging Kenya on penalties in the quarter-final and then scoring an extra-time goal to beat Sudan 1-0 in the semi-final.

It was a textbook metamorphosis of a scrapping team into one of confident precision. In the final, they more than matched the Moroccans with Felicite Manohantsoa putting them ahead inside the opening ten minutes. Morocco soon equalised through Youssef Mehri and then Oussama Lamlioui put the North Africans ahead before half-time.

Morocco had won two of the previous three CHANs and the fact that their domestic season had yet to kick off meant coach Tarik Sektioui had a strong squad at his disposal.

It made them heavy favourites, but Madagascar refused to accede to their supposed superiority and midway through the second half Toky Rakotondraibe tucked away an equaliser.

As the final headed towards extra-time, Lamlioui thrashed the ball in from the edge of the centre circle, catching out the goalkeeper and seeing it sail into the net for a breathtaking winner. A fitting goal to win any tournament and in front of a decent crowd in Nairobi, which bodes well for attendances at the Nations Cup in 2027.

Kenya wallowed in the attention and, even though they were eliminated in the last eight, their players were awarded houses by the government, and those serving in the military were promoted up the ranks.

The other two host nations also made it to the last eight after topping their groups, before Tanzania lost to Morocco, and Senegal beat Uganda.

The poverty of talent left in Nigeria, which is a prolific exporter of footballers, was all too evident as they failed to make it out of the group phase, being thrashed 4-0 by Sudan along the way.

**This CHAN provided a reminder of one of the key reasons it was introduced: to offer a bigger stage to footballers still playing on the African continent**

Madagascar star...Toky Rakotondraibe scored three goals, including one in the final

Match-winner... Oussama Lamlioui celebrates after scoring his screamer

Champions again... Morocco have now won three of the last four CHAN titles

Northern Marianas

STEVE MENARY

# Northern Marianas turn to Trump

## US protectorate requests the President's backing in their bid for FIFA membership

**Presidents ...Donald Trump and Gianni Infantino**

The football association on the tiny US protectorate of the Northern Marianas have called on President Donald Trump for support in their bid to join FIFA.

A chain of 13 islands in the Pacific Ocean, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) is a self-governing unincorporated territory of the USA. The Northern Mariana Islands Football Association (NIMFA) was set up two decades ago by a group of expat soccer-loving parents looking to provide a game for their children and has succeeded in establishing soccer on the islands.

NIMFA joined the East Asian Football Federation in 2008 and was admitted to the Asian Football Confederation as a provisional member the following year. In 2020, NIMFA was accepted as a full member of the AFC, which allowed the national side, nicknamed the Blue Ayuyus after a local species of crab, to enter qualifying for events such as the Asian Cup.

The next logical step was membership of FIFA, which Guam – geographically also part of the Northern Mariana Islands chain but a separate unincorporated US territory – achieved back in 1996. But the world body has rebuffed NIMFA's application three times in 2005, 2014 and 2021 on the grounds that CNMI is not sufficiently independent of the US.

With the US co-hosting the World Cup next year and Trump and FIFA supremo Gianni Infantino regularly appearing in photoshoots together, NIMFA's backers in the US Congress have applied some presidential leverage.

Kimberlyn King-Hinds is a Republican member of congress born on Tinian in Northern Mariana, who wrote to Trump in August pointing out the inequity of her homeland's position; other US protectorates, including American Samoa, Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands, are already FIFA members.

"Other countries, from the United Kingdom to Denmark, enjoy full FIFA membership for their non-sovereign states and territories," wrote Ms King-Hinds. "Yet the United States, co-host of the 2026 FIFA World Cup, sees one of its own communities denied recognition.

"FIFA has justified these denials by pointing to the Commonwealth's political status as self-governing under its covenant with the United States rather than as an independent state. This reasoning is inconsistent and discriminatory given FIFA's acceptance of other protectorates with similar or less political status.

"I respectfully ask you to raise this issue with FIFA president Gianni Infantino and support NIMFA's application for full membership."

Wes Bogdan, a former judge on the Northern Mariana Islands Superior Court, has been working with NIMFA on its bid and secured support from the US Soccer Federation and approached Ms King-Hinds.

"This support from our Congressional Delegate literally just happened," he says. "I've been working with her staff but was totally surprised how quickly this communication to President Trump has happened."

The Northern Mariana Islands' international progress has continued on the pitch with the country's Under-20 women's side registering their first win in an AFC competition in August 2025, when Bahrain were dismissed 3-0 in an U20 Women's Asian Cup qualifier.

All of the players were products of NIMFA's grassroots programmes, which run on the islands of Saipan, Tinian and Rota, and are supported by a $6.5 million development centre.

The island has hosted more than 100 international matches at various levels over the past two decades. FIFA membership is the obvious next step.

> "Other countries enjoy full FIFA membership for their non-sovereign states and territories. Yet the United States, co-host of the 2026 FIFA World Cup, sees one of its own communities denied recognition"
>
> US congresswoman Kimberlyn King-Hinds

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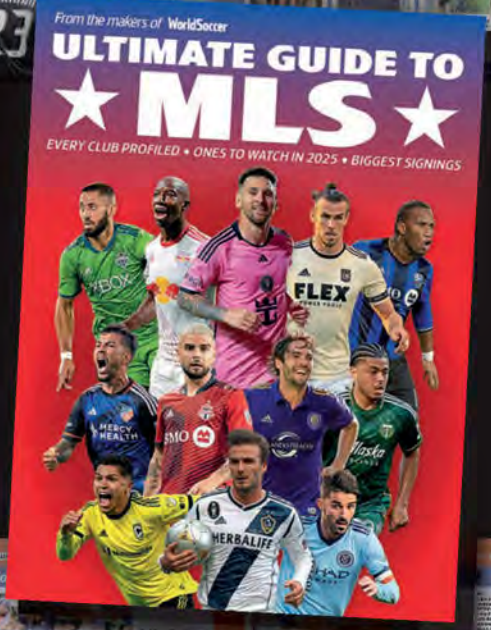

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# Tales from the 211

*Exploring the weird and wonderful world of football across FIFA's 211 member nations – and beyond*

**Founding members... Preston Lions will play in the Australian Championship**
*Credit: Matt Johnson*

## AUSTRALIAN CHAMPIONSHIP LINE-UP CONFIRMED

Australia's brand-new second-tier competition, the Championship, kicks off in October. There are 16 clubs involved in the inaugural edition. The eight founding members are APIA Leichhardt, Avondale, Marconi Stallions, Preston Lions (who featured in the May edition of *World Soccer*), South Melbourne, Sydney Olympic, Sydney United 58 and Wollongong Wolves. They will be joined by the eight state National Premier Leagues (NPL) champions, which this season are Bayswater City, Broadmeadow Magic, Canberra Croatia, Heidelberg United, Moreton City Excelsior, North Eastern MetroStars, NWS Spirit and South Hobart.

The initial plan was to have a standalone, home-and-away league. But with not enough clubs meeting the necessary sporting, financial and geographic criteria, Football Australia was forced to rethink the format. Instead, the 16 participating teams will be divided into four groups of four (playing each other home and away), with the top two progressing to a single-leg knockout phase that concludes in early December. There will be no promotion and relegation for now as a standalone, home-and-away league is required first, but that may happen as early as 2026 if enough clubs can be found.

## WALES FAN MAKES EPIC JOURNEY TO KAZAKHSTAN

When Wales landed in the same 2026 World Cup qualifying group as Kazakhstan, YouTuber John McAllister decided to embark upon a daring challenge and travel the full distance to Astana by road and rail. Setting off from his hometown of Barry at the end of July – a full five weeks before the match – the Welshman travelled over 5,000 kilometres through 12 countries, generating plenty of media interest and even earning a nod from Wales manager Craig Bellamy.

Not everything went according to plan. The closure of Georgia's border with Azerbaijan, combined with the impossibility of travelling through Russia and Iran, forced McAllister to scrap his original plan and take a flight from Tbilisi to Kazakhstan. But there were plenty of highlights once he was there: the 26-year-old attended the country's largest music festival with 80,000 people, took in several ice hockey games and sampled the local delicacy: horse.

McAllister also caught several football matches in the world's ninth-largest country – including the Champions League qualifier between Kairat and Celtic and the second-tier game between Khan Tengri and Kaspiy Aktau (both in Almaty) – before heading to the capital to watch Kieffer Moore give Wales a valuable 1-0 win against Kazakhstan.

## ASSISTANT COACH TAKES ON HIS OWN TEAM

On paper, the Slovak Cup tie between sixth-tier Svodin and top-flight Komarno at the end of August looked like any other. But in reality, it produced the kind of storyline that is rarely seen in a competition of this calibre. Former Slovakia international Kornel Salata, now 40, lined up in defence for Svodin – against Komarno, where he serves as assistant manager.

Salata rose to the occasion, throwing himself into challenges against players that he usually coaches and even supplying an assist. When he was substituted in the 55th minute, he quipped that he would go and join the winning team and – true to his word – headed over to the Komarno bench, where he watched the side he helps coach close out a comfortable 4-1 win.

Two years ago, the Slovnaft Cup produced another unique scenario when third-tier Castkovce hosted top-flight Trencin in a tie that saw goalkeeper Denis Kukucka, 45, bow out of football against his 21-year-old son, Michal, who stood between the sticks for the visitors.

Trencin won 2-1 but the result was little more than a footnote, with the emotional on-pitch embrace between father and son when the former came off in the 12th minute making all the headlines. Kukucka Senior later declared it the greatest moment of his career.

*The Sweeper Podcast*

## COMING UP...

**Japan U20s v Egypt U20s**
**Under-20 World Cup, September 27**
The 2025 Under-20 World Cup gets underway in Chile with two games – this one in Santiago, as well as South Korea v Ukraine in Valparaiso. The hosts also play on the same day, later that evening in the capital against New Zealand, while the final takes place just over three weeks later on Sunday, October 19.

**Bodo/Glimt v Tottenham Hotspur**
**UEFA Champions League, September 30**
Norwegian champions Bodo/Glimt made history as the northernmost club to qualify for the Champions League. Their first home game sees them face Spurs, who beat them in the semi-finals en route to last season's Europa League triumph.

**Jagiellonia Bialystok v Hamrun Spartans**
**UEFA Conference League, October 2**
Hamrun Spartans are the first-ever Maltese team to qualify for the group/league phase of a UEFA competition, leaving Andorra, San Marino and Montenegro as the only countries yet to achieve this milestone. Their campaign begins in Poland.

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# Internationals

## 2026 WORLD CUP QUALIFYING

### EUROPE Section

● *16 direct slots available*

#### Group A

*Sep 4 – Luxembourg City*
**Luxembourg 1** (Dardari 30)
**Northern Ireland 3** (Reid 7, S. Charles 46, Devenny 69)
**Luxembourg:** Morris – Jans, Mahmutovic, Korac, Carlson; Olesen (Duarte 89), Barreiro; Cruz (Borges Sanchez 65), Sinani, Bohnert (Pinto 82); Dardari (Muratovic 81). *Sent off: Korac 66.*
**Northern Ireland:** Peacock-Farrell – Hume, McNair (Saville 84), Toal (McConville 77); Bradley (Donley 76), McCann, S. Charles, Devenny; Galbraith, Price (D. Charles 84); Reid (Marshall 69).

*Sep 4 – Bratislava*
**Slovakia 2** (Hancko 42, Strelec 55)
**Germany 0**
**Slovakia:** Dubravka – Gyomber, Satka, Skriniar, Hancko; Bero, Lobotka, Duda (Benes 90); Duris (Rigo 66), Strelec (Bozenik 83), Sauer (Tupta 83).
**Germany:** Baumann – Collins (Raum 46), Tah, Rudiger, Mittelstadt; Kimmich, Stiller (Amiri 60); Gnabry (Adeyemi 66), Goretzka, Wirtz; Woltemade.

*Sep 7 – Luxembourg City*
**Luxembourg 0**
**Slovakia 1** (Rigo 90)
**Luxembourg:** Morris – Jans, Mahmutovic, Carlson, Bohnert; Olesen (Duarte 90+1), Barreiro; Sinani, Cruz (O. Thill 82), Dardari; Muratovic (Borges Sanchez 70).
**Slovakia:** Dubravka – Gyomber, Satka (Obert 46), Skriniar, Hancko; Bero, Lobotka, Duda (Benes 77); Duris (Rigo 46), Strelec (Bozenik 66), Sauer (Tupta 88).

*Sep 7 – Cologne*
**Germany 3** (Gnabry 7, Amiri 69, Wirtz 72)
**Northern Ireland 1** (Price 34)
**Germany:** Baumann – Rudiger (Tah 82), Anton, Koch; Leweling, Kimmich, Gross (Goretzka 66), Raum; Gnabry (Beier 61), Wirtz; Woltemade (Amiri 61).
**Northern Ireland:** Peacock-Farrell – Hume, McNair, Toal (McConville 88); Bradley, S. Charles, McCann (Saville 76), Devenny; Galbraith (Marshall 76), Price (McDonnell 88); Reid (D. Charles 70).

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Slovakia | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 6 |
| N. Ireland | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 4 | 3 |
| Germany | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Luxembourg | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 0 |

#### Group B

*Sep 5 – Ljubljana*
**Slovenia 2** (Lovric 46, Vipotnik 90)
**Sweden 2** (Elanga 18, Ayari 73)
**Slovenia:** Oblak – Karnicnik, Drkusic, Bijol, Janza; Stojanovic (Seslar 82), Gnezda Cerin, Elsnik (Petrovic 64), Lovric (Mlakar 70); Sporar (Vipotnik 64), Sesko.
**Sweden:** Olsen – Ekdal, Hein, Gudmundsson; Saletros; Bernhardsson (Eliasson 64), H. Larsson, Ayari, Svensson; Elanga (Nygren 63), Gyokeres.

*Sep 5 – Basel*
**Switzerland 4** (Akanji 22, Embolo 25, 45, Widmer 39)
**Kosovo 0**
**Switzerland:** Kobel – Widmer, Elvedi, Akanji, Rodriguez (Muheim 46); Xhaka, Freuler; Vargas (Aebischer 60), Rieder (Manzambi 60), Ndoye (Itten 85); Embolo (Zakaria 75).
**Kosovo:** Muric – Vojvoda, Am. Rrahmani (I. Krasniqi 63), Dellova, Pacarada (Gallapeni 46); Avdullahu (Berisha 83), Rexhbecaj (Al. Rrahmani 46), Jashari; E. Krasniqi (Zabergja 46), Muriqi, Muslija.

*Sep 8 – Pristina*
**Kosovo 2** (Rexhbecaj 26, Muriqi 42)
**Sweden 0**
**Kosovo:** Muric – Vojvoda, I. Krasniqi, Dellova, Aliti, Gallapeni; Muslija (Hodza 90+2), Avdullahu, Rexhbecaj (Emerllahu 85), Al. Rrahmani (Jashari 60); Muriqi (Asllani 59). *Sent off: Emerllahu 90+1.*
**Sweden:** Olsen – Ekdal (Krafth 66), Hein, Gudmundsson; Bernhardsson (Nygren 62), H. Larsson (Nanasi 46), Saletros, Ayari, Svensson (Sema 46); Elanga (Isak 72), Gyokeres.

*Sep 8 – Basel*
**Switzerland 3** (Elvedi 18, Embolo 33, Ndoye 38)
**Slovenia 0**
**Switzerland:** Kobel – Widmer (Schmidt 62), Elvedi, Akanji, Rodriguez; Vargas (Manzambi 62), Freuler, Xhaka, Ndoye (Sohm 90); Rieder (Aebischer 62); Embolo (Zakaria 78).
**Slovenia:** Oblak – Karnicnik (Brekalo 86), Drkusic, Bijol, Janza; Stojanovic (Sturm 61), Gnezda Cerin, Elsnik (Svetlin 61), Lovric (Petrovic 21); Sesko, Vipotnik (Seslar 86).

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Switzerland | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 7 | 0 | 6 |
| Kosovo | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 3 |
| Sweden | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 1 |
| Slovenia | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 5 | 1 |

#### Group C

*Sep 5 – Piraeus*
**Greece 5** (Karetsas 3, Pavlidis 17, Bakasetas 21, Kourbelis 36, Tzolis 63)
**Belarus 1** (Barkovskiy 72 pen)
**Greece:** Tzolakis – Vagiannidis, Mavropanos, Koulierakis, Tsimikas (Mouzakitis 62); Kourbelis (Kyriakopoulos 62), Zafeiris (Mantalos 83); Karetsas, Bakasetas (Konstantelias 73), Tzolis; Pavlidis (Ioannidis 73).
**Belarus:** Pavlyuchenko – Pigas, Martynovich (Volkov 54), Zabelin, Pechenin; Gromyko (Pasevich 67), Korzun, Yablonskiy (Myakish 79), Kovalev (Barkovskiy 46); Melnichenko (Demchenko 67), Ebong.

*Sep 5 – Copenhagen*
**Denmark 0**
**Scotland 0**
**Denmark:** Schmeichel – Kristensen, Andersen, Christensen; Dreyer (Froholdt 74), Hjulmand, Hojbjerg, Maehle; Damsgaard; Dohlberg (Gronbaek 74), Biereth (Hojlund 74).
**Scotland:** Gunn – Hickey (Johnston 70), Souttar, Hanley, Robertson; McTominay, Ferguson; McGinn, Adams (Hirst 83), Christie (McLean 83); Dykes (Gannon-Doak 83).

*Sep 8 – Zalaegerszeg*
**Belarus 0**
**Scotland 2** (Adams 43, Volkov 65 og)
**Belarus:** Lapoukhov – Karpovich (Pigas 46), Parkhomenko, Volkov (Demchenko 71), Zabelin, Pechenin (Malkevich 72); Myakish (Gromyko 65), Kalinin, Ebong; Malashevich (Melnichenko 46), Barkovskiy.
**Scotland:** Gunn – Johnston (Hickey 74), Souttar, McKenna, Robertson; Gilmour (McLean 83), Ferguson; McGinn, McTominay (Miller 90), Gannon-Doak (Christie 74); Adams (Dykes 83).

*Sep 8 – Piraeus*
**Greece 0**
**Denmark 3** (Damsgaard 32, Christensen 62, Hojlund 81)
**Greece:** Tzolakis – Vagiannidis, Mavropanos, Koulierakis, Tsimikas; Kourbelis (Siopis 64), Zafeiris (Ioannidis 75); Karetsas (Bakasetas 46), Konstantelias (Masouras 46), Tzolis (Pelkas 83); Pavlidis.
**Denmark:** Schmeichel – Kristensen, Andersen, Christensen, Maehle (Gronbaek 90); Froholdt (Bruun Larsen 83), Hjulmand, Hojbjerg; Skov Olsen (Dorgu 64), Biereth (Hojlund 64), Damsgaard (O'Riley 83).

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Denmark | 2 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 4 |
| Scotland | 2 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 4 |
| Greece | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 5 | 4 | 3 |
| Belarus | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 7 | 0 |

#### Group D

*Sep 5 – Reykjavik*
**Iceland 5** (Palsson 45+2, Johannesson 47, 56, Gudmundsson 66, Hlynsson 73)
**Azerbaijan 0**
**Iceland:** Olafsson – Palsson (Bjarkason 78), Ingason, Gretarsson; Thorsteinsson (Anderson 68), Thordarsson (B. Willumsson 68), Johannesson, Ellertsson; Haraldsson, A. Gudjohnsen (D. Gudjohnsen 69), Gudmundsson (Hlynsson 69).
**Azerbaijan:** Mahammadaliyev – Badalov (C. Huseynov 62), Mustafazada, Dasdamirov (Bayramov 55); A. Huseynov (Aliyev 72), Abdullazada, Mahmudov (Nuriyev 62), Ibrahimli (Kokcu 55), Cafarquliyev; Akhundzada, Emreli.

*Sep 5 – Wroclaw*
**Ukraine 0**
**France 2** (Olise 10, Mbappe 82)
**Ukraine:** Trubin – Konoplya, Zabarnyi, Matviyenko, Zinchenko (Voloshyn 87); Yarmoliuk (Ocheretko 83); Zubkov (Nazarenko 76), Kaliuzhnyi, Sudakov (Bondarenko 82), Hutsuliak; Dovbyk (Vanat 76).
**France:** Maignan – Kounde (Gusto 90+2), Konate, Upamecano, Digne; Tchouameni, Kone; Doue (Dembele 46, Ekitike 81), Olise (Akliouche 90+3), Barcola (Rabiot 76); Mbappe.

*Sep 9 – Baku*
**Azerbaijan 1** (Mahmudov 72 pen)
**Ukraine 1** (Sudakov 51)
**Azerbaijan:** Mahammadaliyev – Aliyev (A. Huseynov 67), Badalov, Mustafazada, Krivotsyuk, Cafarquliyev; Emreli (Gurbanli 66), Mahmudov, Xaybulayev (Abdullazada 68), Ahmadzada (Bayramov 53); Dadashov (Nuriyev 66).
**Ukraine:** Trubin – Konoplya, Zabarnyi, Matviyenko, Zinchenko (Mykhailichenko 84); Bondarenko (Voloshyn 75), Kaliuzhnyi (Yarmoliuk 61), Ocheretko (Shaparenko 75); Zubkov, Vanat (Dovbyk 61), Sudakov.

*Sep 9 – Paris*
**France 2** (Mbappe 45 pen, Barcola 62)
**Iceland 1** (A. Gudjohnsen 21)
**France:** Maignan – Kounde (Gusto 63), Konate, Upamecano, T. Hernandez; Tchouameni, Kone; Barcola (Coman 63), Olise (Ekitike 90+6), Thuram (Rabiot 70); Mbappe. *Sent off: Tchouameni 68.*
**Iceland:** Olafsson – Anderson (Bjarkason 63), Palsson, Ingason, Gretarsson (Hlynsson 82), Ellertsson; Haraldsson, Johannesson (Thordarsson 70), Thorsteinsson (Helgason 70); A. Gudjohnsen, D. Gudjohnsen (Magnusson 64).

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| France | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 6 |
| Iceland | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 6 | 2 | 3 |
| Ukraine | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 1 |
| Azerbaijan | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 6 | 1 |

#### Group E

*Sep 4 – Tbilisi*
**Georgia 2** (Davitashvili 63, Kvaratskhelia 90+8)
**Turkey 3** (Muldur 3, Akturkoglu 41, 52)
**Georgia:** Mamardashvili – Kakabadze (Gocholeishvili 85), Goglichidze, Kashia, Lochoshvili (Azarovi 68); Tsitaishvili (Gagnidze 46), Kochorashvili, Mekvabishvili (Guliashvili 81), Davitashvili; Mikautadze, Kvaratskhelia.
**Turkey:** Cakir – Muldur, Demiral, Bardakci, Elmali; Yuksek (Kokcu 46), Calhanoglu; Akgun, Guler (Kahveci 86), Yildiz (Kadioglu 79); Akturkoglu (Alper Yilmaz 66). *Sent off: Alper Yilmaz 71.*

*Sep 4 – Sofia*
**Bulgaria 0**
**Spain 3** (Oyarzabal 5, Cucurella 30, Merino 38)
**Bulgaria:** Vutsov – Nedyalkov, Dimitrov, Tsenov, Nurnberger (Bozhinov 62); Panayotov (M. Petkov 46), Chochev (Milanov 81), Gruev; Minkov, Kolev (Nikolov 71), Kirilov (Minchev 72).
**Spain:** Simon – Porro (Carvajal 62), Le Normand (Cubarsi 46), Huijsen, Cucurella; Merino, Zubimendi (Rodri 62), Pedri; Yamal (Rodriguez 79), Oyarzabal, Williams (Olmo 71).

*Sep 7 – Tbilisi*
**Georgia 3** (Kvaratskhelia 30, Gagnidze 44, Mikautadze 65)
**Bulgaria 0**
**Georgia:** Mamardashvili – Kakabadze (Lominadze 83), Goglichidze, Lochoshvili, Azarovi; Gagnidze, Kochorashvili (Mamuchashvili 77), Mekvabishvili; Davitashvili (Lobjanidze 83), Mikautadze (Zivzivadze 77), Kvaratskhelia (Guliashvili 77).
**Bulgaria:** Vutsov – Minkov (Nurnberger 46), Dimitrov, Bozhinov, Tsenov, Nedyalkov; M. Petkov (Shopov 79), Milanov (Chochev 77), Kraev (Gruev 46), Kirilov; Nikolov (Kolev 67).

*Sep 7 – Konya*
**Turkey 0**
**Spain 6** (Pedri 6, 62, Merino 22, 45+1, 57, Torres 53)
**Turkey:** Cakir – Muldur (Celik 63), Demiral, Bardakci, Elmali (Kadioglu 63); Yuksek (Ozcan 82), Calhanoglu (Kokcu 68); Akgun (Aydin 46), Guler, Yildiz; Akturkoglu.
**Spain:** Simon – Porro, Le Normand, Huijsen, Cucurella; Merino, Zubimendi (Rodri 73), Pedri (De Frutos 68); Yamal (Morata 73), Oyarzabal (Fermin 68), Williams (Torres 44).

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Spain | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 9 | 0 | 6 |
| Georgia | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 3 |
| Turkey | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 8 | 3 |
| Bulgaria | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 6 | 0 |

#### Group F

*Sep 6 – Yerevan*
**Armenia 0**
**Portugal 5** (Felix 10, 61, Ronaldo 21, 46, Cancelo 32)
**Armenia:** Avagyan – Hovhannisyan, Harutyunyan, Muradyan, Piloyan, Tiknizyan (Grigoryan 79); Bichakhchyan (Sevikyan 60), Iwu (Aghasaryan 86), Spertsyan; Barseghyan (Shaghoyan 79), Zelarayan (Ranos 60).
**Portugal:** Costa – Cancelo (Palhinha 79), Dias, Inacio, Mendes (Tavares 67); J. Neves, Vitinha; Neto (Trincao 46), Fernandes, Felix (Pote 67); Ronaldo (Ramos 58).

*Sep 6 – Dublin*
**Republic of Ireland 2** (Ferguson 49, Idah 90+3)
**Hungary 2** (Varga 2, Sallai 15)
**Republic of Ireland:** Kelleher – O'Brien, O'Shea, Collins, Doherty (Ogbene 66); Szmodics (Johnston 78), Cullen (Taylor 66), Knight (McAteer 90), Manning; Ferguson, Azaz (Idah 78).
**Hungary:** Dibusz – Nego, Orban, A. Szalai, Kerkez (Z. Nagy 80); Bolla (Mocsi 67), Styles, Szoboszlai, Sallai; A. Toth (Otvos 55); Varga (Barna Toth 80). *Sent off: Sallai 52.*

*Sep 9 – Yerevan*
**Armenia 2** (Spertsyan 45+1 pen, Ranos 51)
**Republic of Ireland 1** (Ferguson 57)
**Armenia:** Cancarevic – Harutyunyan, Muradyan, Piloyan; Hovhannisyan, Iwu, Spertsyan, Tiknizyan; Barseghyan (Shaghoyan 79), Zelarayan (Serobyan 79); Ranos (Bichakhchyan 67).
**Republic of Ireland:** Kelleher – O'Brien, Collins, O'Shea; Ogbene (McAteer 46), Knight, Cullen (Phillips 70), Manning (Scales 81); Taylor (Idah 46), Azaz (Johnston 70); Ferguson.

*Sep 9 – Budapest*
**Hungary 2** (Varga 21, 84)
**Portugal 3** (B. Silva 36, Ronaldo 58 pen, Cancelo 86)
**Hungary:** Balazs Toth – Nego, Orban, A. Szalai, Kerkez (Dardai 90); Bolla (Gruber 90), A. Toth (Otvos 60), Szoboszlai, Styles (Vitalis 81), Z. Nagy (Lukacs 60); Varga.
**Portugal:** Costa – Cancelo, R. Neves, Dias, Mendes; Vitinha (A. Silva 87), J. Neves (Felix 79); B. Silva, Fernandes (Trincao 66), Neto (Palhinha 79); Ronaldo (Ramos 87).

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Portugal | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 8 | 2 | 6 |
| Armenia | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 6 | 3 |
| Hungary | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 5 | 1 |
| Rep of Ireland | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 1 |

#### Group G

*Sep 4 – Kaunas*
**Lithuania 1** (Gineitis 90+6 pen)
**Malta 1** (Satariano 83)
**Lithuania:** Gertmonas – Upstas (Kalinauskas 69), Utkus, Girdvainis, Tutyskinas; Vorobjovas (Jansonas 76), Sirgedas (Golubickas 68); Dolznikov (Jankauskas 46), Gineitis, Lasickas; Paulauskas. *Sent off: Utkus 90+9.*
**Malta:** Bonello – Muscat, Shaw, Pepe, Beerman (Corbalan 46); Paiber (Grech 64), Satariano; J. Mbong (Magri Overend 74), P. Mbong (Jones 74), Chouaref; Cardona (Azzopardi 87). *Sent off: Azzopardi 90+1.*

*Sep 4 – Rotterdam*
**Netherlands 1** (Dumfries 28)
**Poland 1** (Cash 80)
**Netherlands:** Verbruggen – Dumfries, Van Hecke (De Vrij 87), Van Dijk, Van de Ven; Gravenberch, De Jong (Q. Timber 83); Simons (Malen 79), Reijnders (Kluivert 84), Gakpo; Memphis (Weghorst 78).
**Poland:** Skorupski – Cash, Wisniewski (Kedziora 84), Bednarek, Kiwior, Zalewski (Wszolek 71); S. Szymanski (Grosicki 71), Slisz, Zielinski (Kapustka 71), Kaminski; Lewandowski (Swiderski 64).

*Sep 7 – Kaunas*
**Lithuania 2** (Gineitis 36, Girdvainis 43)
**Netherlands 3** (Memphis 11, 63, Q. Timber 33)
**Lithuania:** Gertmonas – Upstas (Beneta 50), Lekiatis, Girdvainis, Armalas, Lasickas; Sirgedas (Golubickas 67), Antanavicius (Vorobjovas 46), Gineitis, Dolznikov (Magdusauskas 76);

Jansonas (Paulauskas. 46).
**Netherlands:** Verbruggen – Dumfries, De Vrij (J. Timber 62), Van Dijk, Ake (Van de Ven 62); Reijnders (Steijn 62), Schouten, Q. Timber; Malen (De Ligt 89), Memphis (Weghorst 84), Gakpo.

*Sep 7 – Chorzow*
**Poland 3** (Cash 27, Lewandowski 45+2, Kaminski 54)
**Finland 1** (Kallman 88)
**Poland:** Skorupski – Cash (Wszolek 46), Wisniewski, Bednarek, Kiwior; S. Szymanski, Slisz (Kapustka 68), Zielinski, Zalewski (Grosicki 67); Lewandowski (Swiderski 67), Kaminski (Buksa 80).
**Finland:** Joronen – Peltola (Stahl 64), Tenho (Ivanov 35), Koski; Alho, Kairinen, Markhiev (Kamara 64), Uronen; Lod (Vaananen 80), Pohjanpalo, Antman (Kallman 64).

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Netherlands | 4 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 15 | 3 | 10 |
| Poland | 5 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 8 | 4 | 10 |
| Finland | 5 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 6 | 8 | 7 |
| Lithuania | 5 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 5 | 7 | 3 |
| Malta | 5 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 12 | 2 |

### Group H

*Sep 6 – Linz*
**Austria 1** (Sabitzer 54 pen)
**Cyprus 0**
**Austria:** A. Schlager – Laimer, Lienhart, Alaba (Danso 70), Mwene; Seiwald, X. Schlager (Posch 70); Wimmer (Schmid 46), Baumgartner (Grillitsch 90+5), Sabitzer; Arnautovic (Gregoritsch 46).
**Cyprus:** Fabiano – Shikkis, Shielis, Laifis, Pileas; Artymatas (Kousoulos 88), Kastanos (Kyriakou 88); Loizou, Charalampous (Kakoullis 80), Tzionis (Kosti 67); Pittas (Sotiriou 67).

*Sep 6 – Serravalle*
**San Marino 0**
**Bosnia & Herzegovina 6** (Tahirovic 21, Dzeko 70, 72, Bazdar 81, Alajbegovic 85, Mujakic 90)
**San Marino:** Colombo – Fabbri, Cevoli, Valentini (Pasolini 84), Riccardi; A. Golinucci, L. Capicchioni (Mularoni 74), Zannoni (Casadei 74); Contadini (Tosi 62), Nanni, Berardi (G. Capicchioni 62).
*Sent off: A. Golinucci 16.*
**Bosnia-Herz:** Vasilj – Gazibegovic, Barisic, Radeljic, Burnic (Mujakic 73); Hajradinovic (Bajraktarevic 46), Basic, Tahirovic (Kospo 76), Alajbegovic; Demirovic (Memic 62), Dzeko (Bazdar 73).

*Sep 9 – Zenica*
**Bosnia & Herzegovina 1** (Dzeko 50)
**Austria 2** (Sabitzer 49, Laimer 65)
**Bosnia-Herz:** Vasilj – Dedic (Gazibegovic 58), Katic, Muharemovic, Mujakic (Bazdar 87); Memic (Basic 72), Tahirovic (Alajbegovic 72), Sunjic, Gigovic (Bajraktarevic 72); Dzeko, Demirovic.
**Austria:** A. Schlager – Laimer, Lienhart, Alaba (Danso 78), Mwene; Schmid (Wimmer 62), X. Schlager (Grillitsch 62), Seiwald; Baumgartner (Prass 90+3), Gregoritsch (Arnautovic 62), Sabitzer.

*Sep 9 – Nicosia*
**Cyprus 2** (Loizou 29, Charalampous 76)
**Romania 2** (Dragus 2, 18)
**Cyprus:** Fabiano – Shikkis, Shielis, Laifis, Pileas (A. Correia 46); Kousoulos (Charalampous 62), Kastanos; Loizou (Kakoullis 62), Kosti (Kyriakou 68), Tzionis (Koutsakos 88); Pittas.
**Romania:** Moldovan – Ratiu, Ghita, Burca, Bancu; R. Marin (Sut 80, Tanase 85), M. Marin, Stanciu; Man (Sorescu 80), Dragus, Dobre (Miculescu 65).

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Bosnia-Herz | 5 | 4 | 0 | 1 | 11 | 3 | 12 |
| Austria | 4 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 9 | 2 | 12 |
| Romania | 5 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 10 | 6 | 7 |
| Cyprus | 5 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 5 | 7 | 4 |
| San Marino | 5 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 1 | 18 | 0 |

### Group I

*Sep 5 – Chisinau*
**Moldova 0**
**Israel 4** (Dor Peretz 15, Solomon 35, Baribo 59, Gloukh 77)
**Moldova:** Avram – Platica, Baboglo, Craciun, Dumbravanu (Motpan 46), Reabciuk; Caimacov, Rata (Dros 56), Ionita (Stina 56); Postolachi (Perciun 73), Bodisteanu (Cojocaru 56).
**Israel:** Dan Peretz – Dasa (Khalaili 73), Nachimas, Lemkin, Revivo; E. Peretz (Jehezkel 79); Biton, Dor Peretz (Kanichowsky 65), Gloukh, Solomon (Shua 65); Baribo (Turgeman 72).

*Sep 5 – Bergamo*
**Italy 5** (Kean 58, Retegui 69, 89, Raspadori 71, Bastoni 90+2)
**Estonia 0**
**Italy:** Donnarumma – Di Lorenzo, Bastoni, Calafiori, Dimarco (Cambiaso 66); Politano (Orsolini 76), Barella, Tonali (Locatelli 76), Zaccagni (Raspadori 67); Kean (F. Esposito 84), Retegui.
**Estonia:** Hein – Schjonning-Larsen, Paskotsi (J. Taam 80), Kuusk, Saliste; Palumets, Shein (Soomets 80); Kait, Kristal (Ainsalu 61), Sinyavskiy (Saarma 67); Sappinen (Anier 80).

*Sep 8 – Debrecen*
**Israel 4** (Locatelli 16 og, Dor Peretz 52, 89, Bastoni 87 og)
**Italy 5** (Kean 40, 54, Politano 59, Raspadori 81, Tonali 90+1)
**Israel:** Dan Peretz – Dasa (Jehezkel 66), Nachimas, Lemkin (Shlomo 9, Turgeman 88), Revivo; Dor Peretz, E. Peretz; Khalaili (Baribo 66), Gloukh, Solomon; Biton (Mizrahi 66).
**Italy:** Donnarumma – Di Lorenzo, Mancini, Bastoni, Dimarco (Cambiaso 79); Politano (Orsolini 68), Barella (Frattesi 68), Locatelli, Tonali; Kean (Raspadori 79), Retegui (Maldini 88).

*Sep 9 – Oslo*
**Norway 11** (Myhre 6, Haaland 11, 36, 43, 52, 83, Odegaard 45+1, Aasgaard 67, 76, 78 pen, 90+1)
**Moldova 1** (Ostigard 74 og)
**Norway:** Nyland – Ryerson, Ajer (Ostigard 73), Heggem, Moller Wolfe; Odegaard, Berge, Myhre (Aasgaard 64); Sorloth (Bobb 64), Haaland (Heggebo 90+2), Nusa (Schjelderup 73).
**Moldova:** Avram – Motpan (Cojocaru 61), Craciun, Baboglo, Platica, Reabciuk; Caimacov (Dros 88), Rata (Bogaciuc 80), Ionita (Dumbravanu 46), Postolachi (Bodisteanu 46); Nicolaescu.

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Norway | 5 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 24 | 3 | 15 |
| Italy | 4 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 12 | 7 | 9 |
| Israel | 5 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 15 | 11 | 9 |
| Estonia | 5 | 1 | 0 | 4 | 5 | 13 | 3 |
| Moldova | 5 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 3 | 25 | 0 |

### Group J

*Sep 4 – Astana*
**Kazakhstan 0**
**Wales 1** (Moore 24)
**Kazakhstan:** Anarbekov – Kasym, Maliy, Alip (Zhaksybayev 81); Kairov, Orazov (Muzhikov 86), Kasabulat, Vorogovskiy; Satpaev (Omirtaev 87), Kenzhebek (Chesnokov 65); Samorodov (Zhumat 86).
**Wales:** Darlow – Williams, Lawlor, Mepham (Cabango 86), B. Davies; Wilson, Sheehan, Cullen (J. James 76); Johnson (D. James 65), Moore (Harris 65), Thomas (Brooks 77).

*Sep 4 – Vaduz*
**Liechtenstein 0**
**Belgium 6** (De Cuyper 29, Tielemans 46, 70 pen, Theate 60, De Bruyne 62, Fofana 90+1)
**Liechtenstein:** Buchel – S. Wolfinger (Meier 76), Malin, Traber, Hofer, Goppel; Luchinger (F. Wolfinger 84), N. Hasler (Zund 84), Sele (A. Hasler 63); Saglam (Pizzi 63), Luque-Nataro.
**Belgium:** Courtois – Meunier (Moreira 79), Debast, Theate, De Cuyper (Castagne 67); Tielemans; Doku (Saelemaekers 61), De Bruyne (Trossard 67), Vanaken, Fofana; Openda (De Ketelaere 61).

*Sep 7 – Skopje*
**North Macedonia 5** (Buchel 15 og, Bardhi 52, Churlinov 56, Qamili 82, Stankovski 90)
**Liechtenstein 0**
**North Macedonia:** Dimitrievski – Ilievski, Zajkov, Stojchevski, Alioski; Churlinov (Qamili 59), Bardhi, Alimi (Ramadani 71), Elmas (Stankovski 83); Miovski (Ristovski 71), Tajkovski (Rastoder 59).
**Liechtenstein:** Buchel – Malin, Traber (Beck 38), Hofer (Oberwaditzer 46); S. Wolfinger (Meier 61), Luchinger (A. Hasler 61), N. Hasler, Sele, Goppel; Luque-Nataro, Saglam (Netzer 75).

*Sep 7 – Brussels*
**Belgium 6** (De Bruyne 42, 84, Doku 44, 60, Raskin 51, Meunier 87)
**Kazakhstan 0**
**Belgium:** Courtois – Castagne, Debast, Theate, De Cuyper (Meunier 71); Tielemans, Raskin (Vanaken 71); Doku (Fofana 63), De Bruyne (Vanhoutte 86), Trossard (Saelemaekers 63); De Ketelaere.
**Kazakhstan:** Seysen – Kasym, Zhaksybayev, Alip; Astanov, Muzhikov (Khalmatov 72), Orazov (Kasabulat 58), Vorogovskiy; Samorodov (Karaman 81), Kenzhebek (Satpaev 46); Omirtaev (Chesnokov 46).

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| N. Macedonia | 5 | 3 | 2 | 0 | 11 | 2 | 11 |
| Belgium | 4 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 17 | 4 | 10 |
| Wales | 5 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 11 | 6 | 10 |
| Kazakhstan | 5 | 1 | 0 | 4 | 3 | 11 | 3 |
| Liechtenstein | 5 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 19 | 0 |

### Group K

*Sep 6 – Riga*
**Latvia 0**
**Serbia 1** (Vlahovic 12)
**Latvia:** Zviedris – Jaunzems (Savalnieks 83), Balodis, Jagodinskis (Melniks 46), Jurkovskis, Ciganiks; Varslavans, Zelenkovs, Saveljevs (Vapne 46), Ikaunieks (Sits 46); Gutkovskis (Melnis 77).
**Serbia:** Petrovic – Veljkovic, Milenkovic, Pavlovic; Lukic (Gudelj 68); Zivkovic, Ilic (A. Mitrovic 82), Katai (Samardzic 46), Kostic (Terzic 82); Vlahovic, Jovic (N. Maksimovic 74).

*Sep 6 – Birmingham*
**England 2** (C. Garcia 25 og, Rice 67)
**Andorra 0**
**England:** Pickford – James (Livramento 68), Guehi (Konsa 76), Burn, Lewis-Skelly; Anderson, Rice (Rogers 68); Madueke, Eze (Gibbs-White 78), Rashford (Gordon 68); Kane.
**Andorra:** Alvarez – Borra, Llovera, C. Garcia, Olivera, San Nicolas; Rodrigo (Daca 81), Babot (Rebes 90+1), M. Vales (Guillen 59), Cervos (Rubio 90+1); Cucu (Lopez 59).

*Sep 9 – Tirana*
**Albania 1** (Asllani 25 pen)
**Latvia 0**
**Albania:** Strakosha – Hysaj, Ajeti, Djimsiti, Mitaj; Shehu, Asllani; Broja (Kumbulla 90+1), Laci (Pajaziti 83), Bajrami (Hoxha 67); Manaj (Daku 83).
**Latvia:** Zviedris – Jurkovskis (Regza 86), Melniks (Savalnieks 46), Cernomordijs, Balodis, Ciganiks; Varslavans, Zelenkovs, Vapne (Saveljevs 61), Daskevics (Gutkovskis 61); Sits (Melnis 78).

*Sep 9 – Belgrade*
**Serbia 0**
**England 5** (Kane 33, Madueke 35, Konsa 52, Guehi 75, Rashford 90 pen)
**Serbia:** Petrovic – Erakovic, Milenkovic, Pavlovic; Nedeljkovic (Jovic 46), N. Maksimovic, Lukic, Birmancevic (Kostic 46); Ilic (Samardzic 61), Zivkovic (Veljkovic 76); Vlahovic (A. Mitrovic 70). *Sent off: Milenkovic 72.*
**England:** Pickford – James (Spence 69), Konsa, Guehi, Livramento; Anderson, Rice (J. Henderson 81); Madueke (Bowen 76), Rogers, Gordon (Rashford 69); Kane (Watkins 76).

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| England | 5 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 13 | 0 | 15 |
| Albania | 5 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 8 |
| Serbia | 4 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 5 | 7 |
| Latvia | 5 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 6 | 4 |
| Andorra | 5 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 10 | 0 |

### Group L

*Sep 5 – Torshavn*
**Faroe Islands 0**
**Croatia 1** (Kramaric 31)
**Faroe Islands:** Lamhauge – Faero, G. Vatnhamar, A. Edmundsson; Danielsen, Hendriksson (Turi 76), Andreasen, Davidsen (Agnarsson 68); Fredriksberg (Bjartalid 76), Olsen (J. Edmundsson 68), Sorensen (Justinussen 87).
**Croatia:** Livakovic – Jakic (Smolcic 80), Pongracic, Caleta-Car, Sosa (Perisic 51); Mario Pasalic (Marco Pasalic 80), Sucic; Baturina (Modric 65), Kramaric, Fruk; Budimir (Ivanovic 51).

*Sep 5 – Podgorica*
**Montenegro 0**
**Czech Republic 2** (Cerv 3, Cerny 90+6)
**Montenegro:** Petkovic – M. Vukcevic (Mugosa 77), Savic, Vujacic, A. Vukcevic (Roganovic 59); Brnovic (Camaj 58), Bulatovic; Vukotic (Loncar 71), Jankovic (Adzic 70), Krstovic; Jovetic.
**Czech Republic:** Stanek – Doudera (Hranac 49), Holes, Krejci, Zeleny; Cerv (Kuchta 85), Soucek; Provod, Sulc (Sadilek 85), Kusej (Cerny 46); Schick (Chory 71).

*Sep 8 – Gibraltar*
**Gibraltar 0**
**Faroe Islands 1** (Agnarsson 68)
**Gibraltar:** Banda – Jolley (Jessop 82), McClafferty, Lopes, Valarino (Mauro 82); Richards, Torrilla (Borge 75), Pozo, J. Scanlon (L. Scanlon 82); Del Rio (El Hmidi 70), De Barr.
**Faroe Islands:** Lamhauge – Chukwudi, G. Vatnhamar, A. Edmundsson; Benjaminsen (Danielsen 59), Hendriksson, Turi (Andreasen 73), Agnarsson; Fredriksberg (Olsen 86), Klettskard (J. Edmundsson 59), Bjartalid (Sorensen 59).

*Sep 8 – Zagreb*
**Croatia 4** (Jakic 35, Kramaric 51, Kuc 85 og, Perisic 90+2)
**Montenegro 0**
**Croatia:** Livakovic – Jakic, Sutalo, Caleta-Car, Stanisic; Modric (Moro 82), Sucic (Majer 71); Mario Pasalic (Fruk 61), Kramaric (Baturina 71), Perisic; Ivanovic (Budimir 62).
**Montenegro:** Petkovic – Vujacic (Rubezic 7), Savic, Sipcic; Roganovic, Bulatovic, Brnovic (Kuc 74), Camaj (A. Vukcevic 59); Vukotic (Bakic 46), Jovetic (Loncar 60); Krstovic.
*Sent off: Bulatovic 42.*

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Croatia | 4 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 17 | 1 | 12 |
| Czech Rep | 5 | 4 | 0 | 1 | 11 | 6 | 12 |
| Faroe Islands | 5 | 2 | 0 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| Montenegro | 5 | 2 | 0 | 3 | 4 | 9 | 6 |
| Gibraltar | 5 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 2 | 17 | 0 |

## SOUTH AMERICA Section

● *6 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot*

### Matchday 17

*Sep 4 – Montevideo*
**Uruguay 3** (Aguirre 14, De Arrascaeta 58, Vinas 80)
**Peru 0**
**Uruguay:** Rochet – Varela, Caceres, M. Olivera, Piquerez; Valverde, Bentancur, De Arrascaeta (Ugarte 69); Pellistri (Zalazar 77), Aguirre (Vinas 74), Rodriguez.
**Peru:** Gallese – Advincula, Garces, Abram, Lopez; Cabrera (Grimaldo 46), Gonzales (Pena 46), Noriega (Pretell 87), Yotun (Concha 66), Quevedo (Rivera 81); Ramos.

*Sep 4 – Barranquilla*
**Colombia 3** (James 31, Cordoba 74, Quintero 83)
**Bolivia 0**
**Colombia:** Vargas – S. Arias, Sanchez, Lucumi, Mojica; Rios, Lerma (Portilla 82); James (Quintero 61), J. Arias (Campaz 61), Diaz (Hinestroza 87); Cordoba (Moreno 82).
**Bolivia:** Lampe – Medina (Rocha 68), Haquin, Morales, Sagredo (H. Vaca 76); Matheus (Vargas 76), E. Vaca, Villamil (Villarroel 77); Paniagua (Algaranaz 68), Terceros, Fernandez.

*Sep 4 – Asuncion*
**Paraguay 0**
**Ecuador 0**
**Paraguay:** Fernandez – Caceres, G. Gomez, Alderete, Alonso; Sosa (Al. Romero 77), D. Gomez, Cubas (Bobadilla 85), Almiron; Sanabria (Arce 85), Martinez (Galarza 61).
**Ecuador:** Galindez – Ordonez, Pacho, Hincapie, Estupinan (Torres 85); Preciado, Alcivar, Vite (Mercado 90+3), Angulo (Minda 85); Paez (Plata 70); Valencia (Rodriguez 70).

*Sep 4 – Buenos Aires*
**Argentina 3** (Messi 39, 80, Lautaro 76)
**Venezuela 0**
**Argentina:** E. Martinez – Molina (Simeone 81), Romero, Otamendi, Tagliafico; De Paul, Paredes (Palacios 74); Mastantuono (Gonzalez 63), Almada (Paz 81); Messi, Alvarez (Lautaro 74).
**Venezuela:** Romo – Aramburu, Ferraresi, Angel, Makoun, Navarro (Soteldo 56); Bello (Murillo 81), Rincon (Yriarte 46), Casseres Jr; Savarino (Flores 67), Rondon (Josef Martinez 56).

*Sep 4 – Rio de Janeiro*
**Brazil 3** (Estevao 38, Paqueta 72, Bruno Guimaraes 76)
**Chile 0**
**Brazil:** Alisson – Wesley Franca, Marquinhos, Gabriel, Douglas Santos; Bruno Guimaraes, Casemiro (Andrey Santos 66); Estevao (Luiz Henrique 66), Raphinha (Richarlison 79), Martinelli (Paqueta 71); Joao Pedro (Kaio Jorge 71).
**Chile:** Vigouroux – Roman, Diaz, Maripan; Hormazabal, Loyola (Echeverria 77), Pizarro, Suazo; Cepeda (Assadi 77), Brereton Diaz (Tapia 59), Aravena (Gutierrez 78).

### Matchday 18

*Sep 9 – Guayaquil*
**Ecuador 1** (Valencia 45+13 pen)
**Argentina 0**
**Ecuador:** Galindez – Franco, Ordonez, Pacho, Hincapie; Preciado (Yeboah 46, Minda 90+3), Caicedo, Vite, Angulo (Alcivar 59); Plata (Rodriguez 69); Valencia (Paez 59).
*Sent off: Caicedo 50.*
**Argentina:** E. Martinez – Montiel (Molina 68), Belardi, Otamendi, Tagliafico; De Paul (Lo Celso 68), Paredes (Mastantuono 62); Simeone (Foyth 38), Mac Allister, Gonzalez; Lautaro (Alvarez 63).
*Sent off: Otamendi 31.*

*Sep 9 – Lima*
**Peru 0**
**Paraguay 1** (Galarza 78)
**Peru:** Gallese – Advincula (Sonne 85), Zambrano, Garces (Noriega 84), Lopez; Grimaldo, Pena (Cari 80), Tapia, Yotun (Concha 62), Cabrera (Quevedo 62); Ramos.
**Paraguay:** Gill – Velazquez (Caceres 68), G. Gomez, Alderete, Sandez; Sosa, D. Gomez (Ojeda 74), Bobadilla, An. Romero (Galarza 46); Sanabria (Avalos 69), Martinez (Al. Romero 46).

*Sep 9 – Maturin*
**Venezuela 3** (Segovia 3 Josef Martinez 12, Rondon 76)
**Colombia 6** (Mina 10, Suarez 42, 50, 59, 67, Cordoba 78)
**Venezuela:** Romo – Aramburu, Ferraresi, Angel, Navarro (Kelsy 63); Bello (Murillo 63), Segovia (Casseres Jr 74), Jose Martinez, Soteldo; Rondon, Josef Martinez (Savarino 69).
**Colombia:** Mier – Munoz, Mina, Sanchez, Angulo; Rios, Lerma (Portilla 86), Castano (J. Arias 77); James (Quintero 68), Suarez (Cordoba 69), Diaz.

*Sep 9 – El Alto*
**Bolivia 1** (Terceros 45+4)
**Brazil 0**
**Bolivia:** Lampe – Medina (Rocha 45), Haquin, Morales, Fernandez; Matheus, E. Vaca (Cuellar 60), Villamil; Terceros, Monteiro (Algaranaz 70), Paniagua.
**Brazil:** Alisson – Vitinho (Marquinhos 61), Fabricio Bruno, Alexsandro, Caio Henrique; Paqueta, Andrey Santos (Jean Lucas 73), Bruno Guimaraes; Luiz Henrique (Estevao 61), Richarlison (Joao Pedro 61), Lino (Raphinha 61).

*Sep 9 – Santiago*
**Chile 0**
**Uruguay 0**
**Chile:** Vigouroux – Hormazabal (Garguez 84), Diaz, Maripan, Suazo; Loyola (Pizarro 46), Echeverria; Cepeda, Altamirano (Assadi 76), Ramos (Tapia 70); Brereton Diaz (Aravena 76).
**Uruguay:** Mele – Nandez, R. Araujo, Caceres, Vina; Valverde, Ugarte, Bentancur; Rodriguez (Amaro 71), Nunez (Vinas 82), C. Olivera.

**Final Standings**

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Argentina (Q) | 18 | 12 | 2 | 4 | 31 | 10 | 38 |
| Ecuador* (Q) | 18 | 8 | 8 | 2 | 14 | 5 | 29 |
| Colombia (Q) | 18 | 7 | 7 | 4 | 28 | 18 | 28 |
| Uruguay (Q) | 18 | 7 | 7 | 4 | 22 | 12 | 28 |
| Brazil (Q) | 18 | 8 | 4 | 6 | 24 | 17 | 28 |
| Paraguay (Q) | 18 | 7 | 7 | 4 | 14 | 10 | 28 |
| Bolivia** | 18 | 6 | 2 | 10 | 17 | 35 | 20 |
| Venezuela | 18 | 4 | 6 | 8 | 18 | 28 | 18 |
| Peru | 18 | 2 | 6 | 10 | 6 | 21 | 12 |
| Chile | 18 | 2 | 5 | 11 | 9 | 27 | 11 |

*Deducted 3 points
**Enter inter-confederational play-offs

## AFRICA Section

● *9 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot*

### Group A

*Sep 4 – Bissau*
**Guinea-Bissau 1** (Mama Balde 74)
**Sierra Leone 1** (K. Kamara 45+1)

*Sep 5 – Bissau*
**Djibouti 0**
**Burkina Faso 6** (Irie 16, Tiendrebeogo 25, Tapsoba 36, 43, Da. Ouattara 59, 86 pen)

*Sep 5 – Cairo*
**Egypt 2** (Salah 41 pen, Marmoush 45+2 pen)
**Ethiopia 0**

*Sep 8 – Bissau*
**Guinea-Bissau 2** (Imbeni 54, Cande 82)
**Djibouti 0**

*Sep 9 – Ouagadougou*
**Burkina Faso 0**
**Egypt 0**

*Sep 9 – Paynesville*
**Sierra Leone 2** (M. Kamara 37, Koroma 90+6)
**Ethiopia 0**

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Egypt | 8 | 6 | 2 | 0 | 16 | 2 | 20 |
| Burkina Faso | 8 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 19 | 7 | 15 |
| Sierra Leone | 8 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 10 | 8 | 12 |
| Burkina Faso | 8 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 8 | 8 | 10 |
| Ethiopia | 8 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 7 | 11 | 6 |
| Djibouti | 8 | 0 | 1 | 7 | 4 | 28 | 1 |

### Group B

*Sep 5 – Nouadhibou*
**Mauritania 2** (Yade 13, Abeid 68)
**Togo 0**

*Sep 5 – Juba*
**South Sudan 1** (Majak 68)
**DR Congo 4** (Bakambu 13, 36, Mbuku 45+1, Wissa 57)

*Sep 5 – Diamniadio*
**Senegal 2** (Koulibaly 14, P. M. Sarr 41)
**Sudan 0**

*Sep 9 – Kinshasa*
**DR Congo 2** (Bakambu 26, Wissa 33)
**Senegal 3** (Gueye 39, Jackson 53, P. M. Sarr 87)

*Sep 9 – Nouadhibou*
**Mauritania 0**
**South Sudan 0**

*Sep 9 – Lome*
**Togo 1** (Fofana 6)
**Sudan 0**

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Senegal | 8 | 5 | 3 | 0 | 13 | 3 | 18 |
| DR Congo | 8 | 5 | 1 | 2 | 13 | 6 | 16 |
| Sudan | 8 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 8 | 5 | 12 |
| Togo | 8 | 1 | 4 | 3 | 5 | 9 | 7 |
| Mauritania | 8 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 9 | 6 |
| South Sudan | 8 | 0 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 14 | 4 |

### Group C

*Sep 5 – Abidjan*
**Benin 1** (Mounie 77)
**Zimbabwe 0**

*Sep 5 – Bloemfontein*
**Lesotho 0**
**South Africa 3** (Nkota 15, Foster 63, Appollis 67)

*Sep 6 – Uyo*
**Nigeria 1** (Arokodare 51)
**Rwanda 0**

*Sep 9 – Bloemfontein*
**South Africa 1** (Troost-Ekong 25 og)
**Nigeria 1** (Bassey 44)

*Sep 9 – Abidjan*
**Benin 4** (Mounie 6, Hountondji 23, Imourane 33, Olaitan 67)
**Lesotho 0**

*Sep 9 – Johannesburg*
**Zimbabwe 0**
**Rwanda 1** (Mugisha 40)

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| South Africa | 8 | 5 | 2 | 1 | 14 | 6 | 17 |
| Benin | 8 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 11 | 7 | 14 |
| Nigeria | 8 | 2 | 5 | 1 | 9 | 7 | 11 |
| Rwanda | 8 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 5 | 5 | 11 |
| Lesotho | 8 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 12 | 6 |
| Zimbabwe | 8 | 0 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 11 | 4 |

### Group D

*Sep 4 – Luanda*
**Angola 0**
**Libya 1** (El Mariamy 48)

*Sep 4 – Saint Pierre*
**Mauritius 0**
**Cape Verde 2** (Cabral 22, Diney Borges 70)

*Sep 4 – Yaounde*
**Cameroon 3** (Gamedze 6 og, Nkoudou 25, Avom 28)
**Eswatini 0**

*Sep 8 – Benghazi*
**Libya 2** (Eisay 8, El Maremi 19)
**Eswatini 0**

*Sep 9 – Praia*
**Cape Verde 1** (Livramento 54)
**Cameroon 0**

*Sep 9 – Luanda*
**Angola 3** (Nzola 17, Fredy 57, Zini 63)
**Mauritius 1** (W. Francois 21)

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cape Verde | 8 | 6 | 1 | 1 | 10 | 5 | 19 |
| Cameroon | 8 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 15 | 5 | 15 |
| Libya | 8 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 9 | 7 | 14 |
| Angola | 8 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 7 | 6 | 10 |
| Mauritius | 8 | 1 | 2 | 5 | 7 | 15 | 5 |
| Eswatini | 8 | 0 | 2 | 6 | 4 | 14 | 2 |

### Group E

*Sep 5 – Brazzaville*
**Congo 1** (Moussavou 68)
**Tanzania 1** (Mwalimu 84)

*Sep 5 – Rabat*
**Morocco 5** (Saibari 29, 38, El Kaabi 51, Igamane 69, Ounahi 84)
**Niger 0**

*Sep 8 – Ndola*
**Zambia 0**
**Morocco 2** (En-Nesyri 7, Igamane 47)

*Sep 9 – Zanzibar City*
**Tanzania 0**
**Niger 1** (Sosah 58)

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Morocco (Q) | 7 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 21 | 2 | 21 |
| Tanzania | 7 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 6 | 6 | 10 |
| Niger | 6 | 3 | 0 | 3 | 7 | 9 | 9 |
| Zambia | 6 | 2 | 0 | 4 | 9 | 9 | 6 |
| Congo | 6 | 0 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 20 | 1 |
| Eritrea* | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

*Withdrew

### Group F

*Sep 3 – Saint Pierre*
**Seychelles 0**
**Gabon 4** (Bouanga 4, 34, 38, M'Bemba 89)

*Sep 5 – Nairobi*
**Kenya 1** (Ogam 81)
**Gambia 3** (Sinyan 12, Minteh 26, Barrow 38)

*Sep 5 – Abidjan*
**Ivory Coast 1** (Bayo 3)
**Burundi 0**

*Sep 9 – Franceville*
**Gabon 0**
**Ivory Coast 0**

*Sep 9 – Nairobi*
**Kenya 5** (Ogam 7, 38, Sichenje 35, Olunga 45+5 pen, 67)
**Seychelles 0**

*Sep 9 – Nairobi*
**Gambia 2** (Fadera 34 pen, Adams 76)
**Burundi 0**

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ivory Coast | 8 | 6 | 2 | 0 | 15 | 0 | 20 |
| Gabon | 8 | 6 | 1 | 1 | 16 | 6 | 19 |
| Gambia | 8 | 3 | 1 | 4 | 17 | 14 | 10 |
| Burundi | 8 | 3 | 1 | 4 | 13 | 10 | 10 |
| Kenya | 8 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 17 | 11 | 9 |
| Seychelles | 8 | 0 | 0 | 8 | 2 | 39 | 0 |

### Group G

*Sep 4 – Ouzou*
**Algeria 3** (Amoura 33, Bounedjah 71, 90+6)
**Botswana 1** (Kopelang 43)

*Sep 5 – Kampala*
**Uganda 4** (Okello 48, Mato 70, 84, Capradossi 90)
**Mozambique 0**

*Sep 5 – Kampala*
**Somalia 0**
**Guinea 3** (Guirassy 22, Othman 64 og, O. Camara 90+6)

*Sep 8 – Casablanca*
**Guinea 0**
**Algeria 0**

*Sep 8 – Kampala*
**Uganda 2** (Okello 6 pen, Ssemugabi 39)
**Somalia 0**

*Sep 8 – Maputo*
**Mozambique 2** (Witi 6, Bangal 71)
**Botswana 0**

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Algeria | 8 | 6 | 1 | 1 | 19 | 7 | 19 |
| Uganda | 8 | 5 | 0 | 3 | 12 | 7 | 15 |
| Mozambique | 8 | 5 | 0 | 3 | 12 | 15 | 15 |
| Guinea | 8 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 7 | 5 | 11 |
| Botswana | 8 | 3 | 0 | 5 | 10 | 13 | 9 |
| Somalia | 8 | 0 | 1 | 7 | 3 | 16 | 1 |

### Group H

*Sep 4 – Oujda*
**Sao Tome & Principe 2** (Ronaldo 8 pen, 42 pen)
**Equatorial Guinea 3** (Ganet 52, Salvador 61, Nabil 69)

*Sep 4 – Tunis*
**Tunisia 3** (Mastouri 5, Sassi 66, Saad 90+4)
**Liberia 0**

*Sep 5 – Francistown*
**Namibia 1** (Ndeunyema 86)
**Malawi 2** (Mbulu 5, Mhango 53)

*Sep 8 – Malabo*
**Equatorial Guinea 0**
**Tunisia 1** (Ben Romdhane 90+4)

*Sep 8 – Lilongwe*
**Malawi 2** (Mhango 72, Kawonga 80)
**Liberia 2** (Kosiah 3, 61)

*Sep 9 – Francistown*
**Namibia 3** (Shalulile 41, 66, 71)
**Sao Tome & Principe 0**

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Tunisia (Q) | 8 | 7 | 1 | 0 | 13 | 0 | 22 |
| Namibia | 8 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 12 | 4 | 15 |
| Liberia | 8 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 9 | 9 | 11 |
| Malawi | 8 | 3 | 1 | 4 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| Equatorial Guinea | 8 | 3 | 1 | 4 | 7 | 11 | 10 |
| Sao Tome & Principe | 8 | 0 | 0 | 8 | 4 | 20 | 0 |

### Group I

*Sep 4 – Casablanca*
**Madagascar 2** (Caddy 45+2, Randrianantenaina 59)
**Central African Republic 0**

*Sep 4 – N'Djamena*
**Chad 1** (Ecua 89)
**Ghana 1** (J. Ayew 17)

*Sep 4 – Berkane*
**Mali 3** (Dorgeles Nene 45, K. Doumbia 70 pen, Coulibaly 76)
**Comoros 0**

*Sep 7 – Meknes*
**Central African Republic 0**
**Comoros 2** (M'Changama 20, Maolida 39)

*Sep 8 – Accra*
**Ghana 1** (Djiku 49)
**Mali 0**

*Sep 8 – Casablanca*
**Madagascar 3** (Caddy 52, Raveloson 69, Abdallah 90+3)
**Chad 1** (Allarabaye 25)

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ghana | 8 | 6 | 1 | 1 | 17 | 6 | 19 |
| Madagascar | 8 | 5 | 1 | 2 | 14 | 7 | 16 |
| Comoros | 8 | 5 | 0 | 3 | 11 | 10 | 15 |
| Mali | 8 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 11 | 5 | 12 |
| Central African Rep | 8 | 1 | 2 | 5 | 8 | 17 | 5 |
| Chad | 8 | 0 | 1 | 7 | 3 | 19 | 1 |

## CONCACAF Section

● *3 direct slots available, plus 2 play-off slots (along with 3 host nations)*

### Third Round

#### Group A

*Sep 4 – Paramaribo*
**Suriname 0**
**Panama 0**

*Sep 4 – Guatemala City*
**Guatemala 0**
**El Salvador 1** (Osorio 79)

*Sep 8 – San Salvador*
**El Salvador 1** (Dijksteel 73 og)
**Suriname 2** (Balker 12, Klas 81)

*Sep 8 – Panama City*
**Panama 1** (Harvey 37)
**Guatemala 1** (Santis 35)

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Suriname | 2 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 4 |
| El Salvador | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 3 |
| Panama | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Guatemala | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 |

#### Group B

*Sep 5 – Devonshire Parish*
**Bermuda 0**
**Jamaica 4** (Lowe 6, Cephas 26, Palmer 58, Nicholson 90)

*Sep 5 – Port of Spain*
**Trinidad & Tobago 0**
**Curacao 0**

*Sep 9 – Kingston*
**Jamaica 2** (Cadamarteri 36, Russell 57)
**Trinidad & Tobago 0**

*Sep 9 – Willemstad*
**Curacao 3** (Chong 14, 26, Noslin 75)
**Bermuda 2** (Crichlow 35, Parfitt 42)

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Jamaica | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 0 | 6 |
| Curacao | 2 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 4 |
| Trinidad & Tob | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 1 |
| Bermuda | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 7 | 0 |

#### Group C

*Sep 5 – Willemstad*
**Haiti 0**
**Honduras 0**

*Sep 5 – Managua*
**Nicaragua 1** (Bonilla 80 pen)
**Costa Rica 1** (Gamboa 60)

*Sep 9 – San Jose*
**Costa Rica 3** (K. Vargas 1, Martinez 35, J. Vargas 90+1)
**Haiti 3** (Nazon 55, 58, 86)

*Sep 9 – Tegucigalpa*
**Honduras 2** (Quioto 47, Vega 90+1)
**Nicaragua 0**

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Honduras | 2 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 4 |
| Costa Rica | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 4 | 4 | 2 |
| Haiti | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 3 | 3 | 2 |
| Nicaragua | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 1 |

## ASIA Section

● *8 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot*

### Fourth Round Draw

#### Group A

**Oct 8:** Oman v Qatar
**Oct 11:** United Arab Emirates v Oman
**Oct 14:** Qatar v United Arab Emirates

#### Group B

**Oct 8:** Indonesia v Saudi Arabia
**Oct 11:** Iraq v Indonesia
**Oct 14:** Saudi Arabia v Iraq

## 2024 AFRICAN NATIONS CHAMPIONSHIP (CHAN)

#### Group A

*Aug 3 – Nairobi*
**Kenya 1** (A. Odhiambo 45+2)
**DR Congo 0**

*Aug 3 – Nairobi*
**Morocco 2** (Riahi 29, Quinito 81 og)
**Angola 0**

*Aug 7 – Nairobi*
**DR Congo 2** (Matobo 51, Mwaku 71)
**Zambia 0**

*Aug 7 – Nairobi*
**Angola 1** (Paciencia 7)
**Kenya 1** (A. Odhiambo 12 pen)

*Aug 10 – Nairobi*
**Kenya 1** (Ogam 42)
**Morocco 0**

*Aug 10 – Nairobi*
**Zambia 1** (Chanda 73)
**Angola 2** (Kaporal 79, 86)

*Aug 14 – Nairobi*
**Morocco 3** (Hrimat 45+2, Lamlioui 66, Bougrine 90+5)
**Zambia 1** (Phiri 70)

*Aug 14 – Nairobi*
**Angola 0**
**DR Congo 2** (Kitambala 58, Katumbwe 70)

*Aug 17 – Nairobi*
**DR Congo 1** (Kitambala 58)
**Morocco 3** (Lamlioui 8, 80, Hrimat 70 pen)

*Aug 17 – Nairobi*
**Zambia**
**Kenya 1** (Ogam 75)

**Final Standings**

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Kenya (Q) | 4 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 10 |
| Morocco (Q) | 4 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 8 | 3 | 9 |
| DR Congo | 4 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 5 | 4 | 6 |
| Angola | 4 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 6 | 4 |
| Zambia | 4 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 2 | 8 | 0 |

#### Group B

*Aug 2 – Dar es Salaam*
**Tanzania 2** (Abdul Sopu 45+3 pen, Zimbwe Jr 71)
**Burkina Faso 0**

*Aug 3 – Dar es Salaam*
**Madagascar 0**
**Mauritania 0**

*Aug 6 – Dar es Salaam*
**Mauritania 0**
**Tanzania 1** (Kapombe 89)

*Aug 6 – Dar es Salaam*
**Burkina Faso 4** (Nasser Ouatarra 11, Guiro 61 pen, Malo 78 pen, Baguian 84)
**Central African Republic 2** (Tchibinda 15, Zoumara 90+5)

*Aug 9 – Dar es Salaam*
**Central African Republic 0**
**Mauritania 1** (El Moctar 9)

*Aug 9 – Dar es Salaam*
**Tanzania 2** (Mzize 13, 20)
**Madagascar 1** (Razafimahatana 34)

*Aug 13 – Dar es Salaam*
**Madagascar 2** (Rakotondraibe 84, Rafanomezantsoa 90+4)
**Central African Republic 0**

*Aug 13 – Dar es Salaam*
**Mauritania 1** (Alassane Diop 45+9)
**Burkina Faso 0**

*Aug 16 – Dar es Salaam*
**Burkina Faso 1** (Sangare 25)
**Madagascar 2** (Razafimaro 7, Rafanomezantsoa 58)

*Aug 16 – Dar es Salaam*
**Central African Republic 0**
**Tanzania 0**

**Final Standings**

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Tanzania (Q) | 4 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 5 | 1 | 10 |
| Madagascar (Q) | 4 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 7 |
| Mauritania | 4 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 7 |
| Burkina Faso | 4 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 5 | 7 | 3 |
| Central African Rep | 4 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 7 | 1 |

#### Group C

*Aug 4 – Kampala*
**Niger 0**
**Guinea 1** (Cantona 47)

*Aug 4 – Kampala*
**Uganda 0**
**Algeria 3** (Ghezala 36, Meziane 76, Bayazid 79)

*Aug 8 – Kampala*
**Algeria 1** (Belhocini 29)
**South Africa 1** (Kutumela 45)

*Aug 8 – Kampala*
**Guinea 0**
**Uganda 3** (Mpande 31, Okello 62 pen, Ahimbisibwe 89)

*Aug 11 – Kampala*
**South Africa 2** (Maema 10, Kutumela 54)
**Guinea 1** (Mo. Camara 37)

*Aug 11 – Kampala*
**Uganda 2** (Okello 25, Sserunjogi 56)
**Niger 0**

*Aug 15 – Kampala*
**Guinea 1** (I. Camara 62)
**Algeria 1** (Bayazid 88)

*Aug 15 – Kampala*
**Niger 0**
**South Africa 0**

*Aug 18 – Kampala*
**Algeria 0**
**Niger 0**

*Aug 18 – Kampala*
**South Africa 3** (Mphahlele 52, Kutumela 58, Ndlondlo 83)
**Uganda 3** (Ssemugabi 31, Okello 88 pen, Ochaki 90+6 pen)

**Final Standings**

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Uganda (Q) | 4 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 8 | 6 | 7 |
| Algeria (Q) | 4 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 5 | 2 | 6 |
| South Africa | 4 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 6 | 5 | 6 |
| Guinea | 4 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 6 | 4 |
| Niger | 4 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 3 | 2 |

#### Group D

*Aug 5 – Zanzibar City*
**Congo 1** (Ekongo 86)
**Sudan 1** (Kanti 29)

*Aug 5 – Zanzibar City*
**Senegal 1** (Gomis 75)
**Nigeria 0**

*Aug 12 – Zanzibar City*
**Senegal 1** (Layousse 82)
**Congo 1** (Moussavou 19)

*Aug 12 – Zanzibar City*
**Sudan 4** (Ngenge 25 og, Khidir 44 pen, Abdel Raouf 55, 62)
**Nigeria 0**

*Aug 19 – Zanzibar City*
**Nigeria 2** (Yusuf 56, Sikiru 90+3)
**Congo 0**

*Aug 19 – Zanzibar City*
**Sudan 0**
**Senegal 0**

**Final Standings**

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sudan (Q) | 3 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 5 | 1 | 5 |
| Senegal (Q) | 3 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 5 |
| Nigeria | 3 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 5 | 3 |
| Congo | 3 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 2 |

#### Quarter-Finals

*Aug 22 – Nairobi*
**Kenya 1** (Omija 48)
**Madagascar 1** (Razafimaro 69 pen)
*After Extra-Time; Madagascar win 4-3 on pens*

*Aug 22 – Dar es Salaam*
**Tanzania 0**
**Morocco 1** (Lamlioui 65)

*Aug 23 – Kampala*
**Uganda 0**
**Senegal 1** (Ba 62)

*Aug 23 – Zanzibar City*
**Sudan 1** (Ghezala 48 og)
**Algeria 1** (Bayazid 73)
*After Extra-Time; Sudan win 4-2 on pens*

#### Semi-Finals

*Aug 26 – Dar es Salaam*
**Madagascar 1** (Rakotondraibe 116)
**Sudan 0**
*After Extra-Time*

*Aug 26 – Kampala*
**Morocco 1** (Bougrine 23)
**Senegal 1** (Layousse 16)
*After Extra-Time; Morocco win 5-3 on pens*

#### Third Place Play-Off

*Aug 29 – Kampala*
**Sudan 1** (Asad 6)
**Senegal 1** (Ndiaye 58)
*Senegal win 4-2 on pens*

#### Final

*Aug 30 – Nairobi*
**Madagascar 2** (Manohantsoa 9, Rakotondraibe 68)
**Morocco 3** (Mehri 27, Lamlioui 44, 80)

## 2025 OUTRIGGER CHALLENGE CUP

**Aug 13:**
US Virgin Islands 1-1 Turks & Caicos
(*US Virgin Islands win 5-4 on pens*)
**Aug 14:**
Turks & Caicos 3-3 Ozark United U19
(*Turks & Caicos Islands win 5-4 on pens*)
Marshall Islands 0-4 US Virgin Islands
**Aug 16:**
Marshall Islands 2-3 Turks & Caicos
US Virgin Islands 4-2 Ozark United U19

**Final Standings**

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| US Virgin Islands (C) | 3 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 9 | 3 | 9 |
| Turks & Caicos | 3 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 7 | 6 | 6 |
| Ozark United U19 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 5 | 7 | 0 |
| Marshall Islands | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 7 | 0 |

## FRIENDLIES

*Aug 24 – Al Rayyan*
**Qatar 0**
**Lebanon 1** (Kaddour 6)

*Sep 3 – Doha*
**Qatar 2** (Muntari 17, Alaaeldin 87)
**Bahrain 2** (Al Aswad 62 pen, Al Khatal 66)

*Sep 4 – Prague*
**Saudi Arabia 2** (Al Buraikan 45, Al Hamdan 79)
**North Macedonia 1** (Trajkovski 40)

*Sep 4 – Oslo*
**Norway 1** (Haaland 17 pen)
**Finland 0**

*Sep 4 – Moscow*
**Russia 0**
**Jordan 0**

*Sep 4 – Gibraltar*
**Gibraltar 0**
**Albania 1** (Asani 69 pen)

*Sep 4 – Dubai*
**United Arab Emirates 3** (Ivkovic 62, Al Ghassani 78 pen, Suarez 86)
**Syria 1** (Al Salkhadi 36)

*Sep 4 – Kuala Lumpur*
**Malaysia 2** (Wilkin 27, Figueiredo 54)
**Singapore 1** (Ilhan 72)

*Sep 5 – Canberra*
**Australia 1** (Balard 87)
**New Zealand 0**

*Sep 5 – Surabaya*
**Indonesia 6** (Amat 4, Chao Ming-hsiu 23 og, Klok 33, Reijnders 38, Sananta 58, Walsh 60)
**Chinese Taipei 0**

*Sep 5 – Bucharest*
**Romania 0**
**Canada 3** (J. David 11, Ahmed 22, Sigur 77)

*Sep 6 – Harrison*
**United States 0**
**South Korea 2** (Son Heung-min 18, Lee Dong-gyeong 43)

*Sep 6 – Colombo*
**Sri Lanka 0**
**Maldives 3** (Naiz 27, Mahudhee 34, Fasir 90+2)

*Sep 6 – Kathmandu*
**Nepal 0**
**Bangladesh 0**

*Sep 6 – Oakland*
**Mexico 0**
**Japan 0**

*Sep 7 – Al Rayyan*
**Qatar 1** (Afif 62)
**Russia 4** (Golovin 33, Kislyak 35, Sergeyev 45, Al. Miranchuk 69)

*Sep 8 – Surabaya*
**Indonesia 0**
**Lebanon 0**

*Sep 8 – Hradec Kralove*
**Czech Republic 1** (Chory 21 pen)
**Saudi Arabia 1** (Al Hamdan 90+1)

*Sep 8 – Dubai*
**United Arab Emirates 1** (Luanzinho 24)
**Bahrain 0**

*Sep 8 – Doha*
**Syria 2** (Shamoun 24, Faqa 80)
**Kuwait 2** (Dashti 65, Daham 74)

*Sep 8 – Johor*
**Malaysia 1** (Figueiredo 3)
**Palestine 0**

*Sep 9 – Auckland*
**New Zealand 1** (Wood 57)
**Australia 3** (Toure 35, 60, Irankunda 54)

*Sep 9 – Swansea*
**Wales 0**
**Canada 1** (Cornelius 41)

*Sep 9 – Tallinn*
**Estonia 0**
**Andorra 0**

*Sep 9 – Amman*
**Jordan 3** (Olwan 7, Sadeh 48, Abu Zrayq 90+3)
**Dominican Republic 0**

*Sep 9 – Ta'Qali*
**Malta 3** (Cardona 5, Muscat 11, P. Mbong 34)
**San Marino 1** (Nanni 45+2 pen)

*Sep 9 – Kallang*
**Singapore 1** (Ilhan 90)
**Myanmar 1** (Thet Hein Soe 60)

*Sep 9 – Colombo*
**Sri Lanka 1** (Kelaart 90+2)
**Maldives 1** (Naiz 67)

*Sep 9 – Columbus*
**United States 2** (Zendejas 30, Balogun 64)
**Japan 0**

*Sep 9 – Nashville*
**Mexico 2** (Jimenez 22, Gimenez 90+4)
**South Korea 2** (on Heung-min 65, Oh Hyeon-gyu 75)

# Club Football

# EUROPE

## 2025-26 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

### Play-Off Round – Champions Path

**Aug 19-20:**
Ferencvaros (Hun) 1-3 Qarabag (Aze); Red Star Belgrade (Srb) 1-2 Pafos (Cyp); Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 5-0 Sturm Graz (Aut); Celtic (Sco) 0-0 Kairat (Kaz); Basel (Sui) 1-1 Copenhagen (Den)
**Aug 26-27:**
Pafos (Cyp) 1-1 Red Star Belgrade (Srb) (agg 3-2); Sturm Graz (Aut) 2-1 Bodo/Glimt (Nor) (agg 2-6); Kairat (Kaz) 0-0 Celtic (Sco) (agg 0-0, *AET; Kairat win 3-2 on pens*); Qarabag (Aze) 2-3 Ferencvaros (Hun) (agg 5-4); Copenhagen (Den) 2-0 Basel (Sui) (agg 3-1)

### Play-Off Round – League Path

**Aug 19-20:**
Rangers (Sco) 1-3 Club Brugge (Bel); Fenerbahce (Tur) 0-0 Benfica (Por)
**Aug 27:**
Club Brugge (Bel) 6-0 Rangers (Sco) (agg 9-1); Benfica (Por) 1-0 Fenerbahce (Tur) (agg 1-0)

## 2025-26 EUROPA LEAGUE

### Play-Off Round

**Aug 21:**
Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) 3-1 Dynamo Kyiv (Ukr); Shkendija (Mkd) 2-1 Ludogorets (Bul); Slovan Bratislava (Svk) 0-1 Young Boys (Sui); Malmo (Swe) 3-0 Sigma Olomouc (Cze); Panathinaikos (Gre) 2-1 Samsunspor (Tur); Aberdeen (Sco) 2-2 FCSB (Rou); Lech Poznan (Pol) 1-5 Genk (Tur); Midtjylland (Den) 4-0 KuPS (Fin); Lincoln Red Imps (Gib) 0-4 Braga (Por); Zrinjski Mostar (Bih) 0-2 Utrecht (Ned); Brann (Nor) 2-1 AEK Larnaca (Cyp); Rijeka (Cro) 1-0 PAOK (Gre)
**Aug 27-28:**
AEK Larnaca (Cyp) 0-4 Brann (Nor) (agg 1-6); Dynamo Kyiv (Ukr) 1-0 Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) (agg 2-3); Ludogorets (Bul) 4-1 Shkendija (Mkd) (agg 5-3, *AET*); Young Boys (Sui) 3-2 Slovan Bratislava (Svk) (agg 4-2); Sigma Olomouc (Cze) 0-2 Malmo (Swe) (agg 0-5); Samsunspor (Tur) 0-0 Panathinaikos (Gre) (agg 1-2); FCSB (Rou) 3-0 Aberdeen (Sco) (agg 5-2); Genk (Tur) 1-2 Lech Poznan (Pol) (agg 6-3); KuPS (Fin) 0-2 Midtjylland (Den) (agg 0-6); Braga (Por) 5-1 Lincoln Red Imps (Gib) (agg 9-1); Utrecht (Ned) 0-0 Zrinjski Mostar (Bih) (agg 2-0); PAOK (Gre) 5-0 Rijeka (Cro) (agg 5-1)

## 2025-26 CONFERENCE LEAGUE

### Play-Off Round – Champions Path

**Aug 21:** Hamrun Spartans (Mlt) 1-0 RFS (Lva); Shelbourne (Irl) 3-1 Linfield (Nir); Breidablik (Isl) 2-1 Virtus (Smr); Drita (Kos) 2-1 Differdange 03 (Lux); Olimpija Ljubljana (Svn) 1-4 Noah (Arm)
**Aug 28:**
RFS (Lva) 2-2 Hamrun Spartans (Mlt) (agg 2-3); Linfield (Nir) 0-2 Shelbourne (Irl) (agg 1-5); Virtus (Smr) 1-3 Breidablik (Isl) (agg 2-5); Differdange 03 (Lux) 0-1 Drita (Kos) (agg 1-3); Noah (Arm) 3-2 Olimpija Ljubljana (Svn) (agg 7-3)

### Play-Off Round – Main Path

**Aug 21:**
Strasbourg (Fra) 0-0 Brondby (Den); Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) 3-0 Dinamo City (Alb); Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 1-1 Servette (Sui); Anderlecht (Bel) 1-1 AEK Athens (Gre); Istanbul Basaksehir (Tur) 1-2 Universitatea Craiova (Rou); Crystal Palace (Eng) 1-0 Fredrikstad (Nor); Celje (Svn) 1-0 Banik Ostrava (Cze); Rakow Czestochowa (Pol) 1-0 Arda (Bul); Hibernian (Sco) 1-2 Legia Warsaw (Pol); Levski Sofia (Bul) 0-2 AZ (Ned); Polissya Zhytomyr (Ukr) 0-3 Fiorentina (Ita); Gyor (Hun) 2-1 Rapid Vienna (Aut); Neman Grodno (Blr) 0-1 Rayo Vallecano (Spa); Lausanne-Sport (Sui) 1-1 Besiktas (Tur); Santa Clara (Por) 1-2 Shamrock Rovers (Irl); Rosenborg (Nor) 2-1 Mainz (Ger); Sparta Prague (Cze) 2-0 Riga (Lva); BK Hacken (Swe) 7-2 CFR Cluj (Rou); Wolfsberger (Aut) 2-1 Omonia (Cyp)
**Aug 27-28:**
Riga (Lva) 1-0 Sparta Prague (Cze) (agg 1-2); Brondby (Den) 2-3 Strasbourg (Fra) (agg 2-3); Dinamo City (Alb) 1-1 Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) (agg 1-4); Servette (Sui) 1-2 Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) (agg 2-3, *AET*); AEK Athens (Gre) 2-0 Anderlecht (Bel) (agg 3-1); Universitatea Craiova (Rou) 3-1 Istanbul Basaksehir (Tur) (agg 5-2); Fredrikstad (Nor) 0-0 Crystal Palace (Eng) (agg 0-1); Banik Ostrava (Cze) 0-2 Celje (Svn) (agg 0-3); Arda (Bul) 1-2 Rakow Czestochowa (Pol) (agg 1-3); Legia Warsaw (Pol) 3-3 Hibernian (Sco) (agg 5-4, *AET*); AZ (Ned) 4-1 Levski Sofia (Bul) (agg 6-1); Fiorentina (Ita) 3-2 Polissya Zhytomyr (Ukr) (agg 6-2); Rapid Vienna (Aut) 2-0 Gyor (Hun) (agg 3-2); Rayo Vallecano (Spa) 4-0 Neman Grodno (Blr) (agg 5-0); Besiktas (Tur) 0-1 Lausanne-Sport (Sui) (agg 1-2); Shamrock Rovers (Irl) 0-0 Santa Clara (Por) (agg 2-1); Mainz (Ger) 4-1 Rosenborg (Nor) (agg 5-3); CFR Cluj (Rou) 1-0 BK Hacken (Swe) (agg 3-7); Omonia (Cyp) 1-0 Wolfsberger (Aut) (agg 2-2, *AET; Omonia win 5-4 on pens*)

## 2025 GERMAN SUPER CUP

*Aug 16 – Stuttgart*
**Stuttgart 1** (Leweling 90+3)
**Bayern Munich 2** (Kane 18, Diaz 77)

# SOUTH AMERICA

## 2025 COPA LIBERTADORES

### Last 16 – 2nd Leg

*Aug 19 – Sao Paulo*
**Sao Paulo (Bra) 1** (Andre Silva 3)
**Atletico Nacional (Col) 1** (Morelos 70 pen)
*1-1 on aggregate; Sao Paulo win 4-3 on pens*

*Aug 19 – Buenos Aires*
**Velez Sarsfield (Arg) 2** (Carrizo 7, Galvan 28)
**Fortaleza (Bra) 0**
*Velez Sarsfield win 2-0 on aggregate*

*Aug 19 – Avellaneda*
**Racing (Arg) 3** (Martinez 7, 83 pen, Pardo 90+4)
**Penarol (Uru) 1** (Herrera 15)
*Racing win 3-2 on aggregate*

*Aug 20 – Porto Alegre*
**Internacional (Bra) 0**
**Flamengo (Bra) 2** (De Arrascaeta 27, Pedro 88)
*Flamengo win 3-0 on aggregate*

*Aug 20 – La Plata*
**Estudiantes (Arg) 0**
**Cerro Porteno (Par) 0**
*Estudiantes win 1-0 on aggregate*

*Aug 21 – Sao Paulo*
**Palmeiras (Bra) 0**
**Universitario (Per) 0**
*Palmeiras win 4-0 on aggregate*

*Aug 21 – Buenos Aires*
**River Plate (Arg) 1** (Driussi 29)
**Libertad (Par) 1** (Rojas 43)
*1-1 on aggregate; River Plate win 3-1 on pens*

*Aug 21 – Quito*
**LDU Quito (Ecu) 2** (Villamil 7, Alzugaray 60 pen)
**Botafogo (Bra) 0**
*LDU Quito win 2-1 on aggregate*

## 2025 COPA SUDAMERICANA

### Last 16 – 2nd Leg

*Aug 19 – Buenos Aires*
**Huracan (Arg) 1** (Miljevic 39 (pen))
**Once Caldas (Col) 3** (Moreno 40, 88, Barrios 65)
*Once Caldas win 4-1 on aggregate*

*Aug 19 – Rio de Janeiro*
**Fluminense (Bra) 2** (Serna 23, Martinelli 56)
**America de Cali (Col) 0**
*Fluminense win 4-1 on aggregate*

*Aug 19 – Quito*
**Mushuc Runa (Ecu) 2** (Chala 45+2, Penilla 71)
**Independiente del Valle (Ecu) 1** (Hoyos 90+10)
*2-2 on aggregate; Ind del Valle win 4-2 on pens*

*Aug 20 – Quito*
**Universidad Catolica (Ecu) 1** (Londono 18)
**Alianza Lima (Per) 2** (E. Castillo 39, Quevedo 81)
*Alianza Lima win 4-1 on aggregate*

*Aug 20 – Cusco*
**Cienciano (Per) 0**
**Bolivar (Bol) 2** (Cauteruccio 15 pen, Batallini 45+1)
*Bolivar win 4-0 on aggregate*

*Aug 20 – Avellaneda*
**Independiente (Arg) -**
**Universidad de Chile (Chi) -**
*Match abandoned*

*Aug 21 – Lanus*
**Lanus (Arg) 1** (Aquino 90)
**Central Cordoba (Arg) 0**
*1-1 on aggregate; Lanus win 4-2 on pens*

*Aug 21 – Godoy Cruz*
**Godoy Cruz (Arg) 0**
**Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 1** (Natanael 48)
*Atletico Mineiro win 3-1 on aggregate*

## 2024 ARGENTINA SUPER CUP

*Sep 6 – Rosario*
**Velez Sarsfield 2** (Gordon 49, 86)
**Central Cordoba 0**

# CONCACAF

## 2025 LEAGUES CUP

### Quarter-Finals

*Aug 20 – Fort Lauderdale*
**Inter Miami (USA) 2** (Suarez 23 pen, 89 pen)
**Tigres UANL (Mex) 1** (Correa 67)

*Aug 20 – Carson*
**Toluca (Mex) 0**
**Orlando City (USA) 0**
*Orlando City win 6-5 on pens*

*Aug 20 – Seattle*
**Seattle Sounders (USA) 0**
**Puebla (Mex) 0**
*Seattle Sounders win 4-3 on pens*

*Aug 20 – Carson*
**LA Galaxy (USA) 2** (Aceves 27 og, Reus 37)
**Pachuca (Mex) 1** (Alemao 90+6)

### Semi-Finals

*Aug 27 – Fort Lauderdale*
**Inter Miami (USA) 3** (Messi 77 pen, 88, Segovia 90+1)
**Orlando City (USA) 1** (Pasalic 45+1)

*Aug 27 – Carson*
**LA Galaxy (USA) 0**
**Seattle Sounders (USA) 2** (De la Vega 7, De Rosario 57)

### Third Place Play-Off

*Aug 31 – Carson*
**LA Galaxy (USA) 2** (Reus 9, Paintsil 67)
**Orlando City (USA) 1** (Ojeda 60)

### Final

*Aug 31 – Seattle*
**Seattle Sounders (USA) 3** (De Rosario 26, A. Roldan 84 pen, Rothrock 89)
**Inter Miami (USA) 0**

## 2025 CONCACAF CARIBBEAN CUP

### Group A

**Aug 19-20:**
Mount Pleasant (Jam) 1-0 Robinhood (Sur); O&M (Dom) 2-0 Central (Tri)
**Aug 26-27:**
Robinhood (Sur) 2-2 Central (Tri); Moca (Dom) 0-2 Mount Pleasant (Jam)

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mount Pleasant | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 6 |
| O&M | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 3 |
| Robinhood | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 1 |
| Central | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 1 |
| Moca | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 |

Group B

**Aug 19-21:**
Cibao (Dom) 2-0 Cavalier (Jam); Defence Force (Tri) 1-0 Juventus des Cayes (Hai)
**Aug 26-27:**
Weymouth Wales (Bar) 1-2 Cibao (Dom); Cavalier (Jam) 1-1 Juventus des Cayes (Hai)

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cibao | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 6 |
| Defence Force | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 3 |
| Juventus DC | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| Cavalier | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 1 |
| Weymouth Wales | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 0 |

## 2025 CONCACAF CENTRAL AMERICAN CUP

Group A

**Aug 19-21:**
Plaza Amador (Pan) 3-2 Managua (Nca); Alianza (Slv) 0-1 Alajuelense (Crc)
**Aug 27:**
Alajuelense (Crc) 1-0 Antigua GFC (Gua); Plaza Amador (Pan) 1-0 Alianza (Slv)

Final Standings

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Plaza Amador (Q) | 4 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 11 | 6 | 12 |
| Alajuelense (Q) | 4 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 9 |
| Antigua GFC | 4 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 7 | 7 | 4 |
| Alianza | 4 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 4 |
| Managua | 4 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 4 | 10 | 0 |

Group B

**Aug 20-21:**
Real Espana (Hon) 1-0 Diriangen (Nca); Sporting San Miguelito (Pan) 2-0 Herediano (Crc)
**Aug 28:**
Herediano (Crc) 4-4 Municipal (Gua); Real Espana (Hon) 4-0 Sporting San Miguelito (Pan)

Final Standings

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sporting SM (Q) | 4 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 5 | 7 |
| Real Espana (Q) | 4 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 8 | 6 | 6 |
| Municipal | 4 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 8 | 7 | 6 |
| Diriangen | 4 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 5 | 5 | 4 |
| Herediano | 4 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 10 | 12 | 4 |

Group C

**Aug 20:**
Cartagines (Crc) 8-1 Verdes (Blz); Independiente (Pan) 1-0 Saprissa (Crc);
**Aug 26:**
Saprissa (Crc) 0-0 Motagua (Hon); Cartagines (Crc) 4-0 Independiente (Pan)

Final Standings

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Motagua (Q) | 4 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 6 | 2 | 8 |
| Cartagines (Q) | 4 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 12 | 3 | 7 |
| Saprissa | 4 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 2 | 7 |
| Independiente | 4 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 5 | 7 | 6 |
| Verdes | 4 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 4 | 17 | 0 |

Group D

**Aug 19-21:**
Aguila (Slv) 2-2 Olimpia (Hon); Real Esteli (Nca) 3-0 Hercules (Slv)
**Aug 27:**
Olimpia (Hon) 3-0 Xelaju (Gua); Real Esteli (Nca) 2-0 Aguila (Slv)

Final Standings

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Olimpia (Q) | 4 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 11 | 3 | 10 |
| Xelaju (Q) | 4 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 9 | 4 | 9 |
| Real Esteli | 4 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 6 | 7 | 6 |
| Aguila | 4 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 7 | 4 |
| Hercules | 4 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 10 | 0 |

## 2025 CANADIAN CHAMPIONSHIP

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

**Aug 13:** Forge 2-2 Vancouver Whitecaps; Vancouver FC 3-1 Atletico Ottawa

## Final Tables 2024-25

### BONAIRE

Regular Season

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Real Rincon* | 10 | 9 | 1 | 0 | 64 | 10 | 28 |
| Vitesse Bonaire* | 10 | 7 | 2 | 1 | 48 | 12 | 23 |
| Atletiko Flamingo* | 10 | 5 | 4 | 1 | 32 | 15 | 19 |
| Uruguay* | 10 | 6 | 1 | 3 | 32 | 17 | 19 |
| Vespo* | 10 | 5 | 2 | 3 | 17 | 11 | 17 |
| Independiente Bonaire* | 10 | 5 | 0 | 5 | 23 | 31 | 15 |
| Juventus Antriol | 10 | 4 | 1 | 5 | 19 | 27 | 13 |
| Estrellas | 10 | 4 | 0 | 6 | 22 | 24 | 12 |
| Young Boys | 10 | 2 | 1 | 7 | 18 | 41 | 7 |
| Atletiko Tera Cora | 10 | 1 | 0 | 9 | 15 | 57 | 3 |
| Arriba Peru | 10 | 1 | 0 | 9 | 17 | 62 | 3 |

*Advance to next round

Kaya 6

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Real Rincon* | 5 | 4 | 1 | 0 | 24 | 4 | 13 |
| Vitesse Bonaire* | 5 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 11 | 11 | 8 |
| Atletiko Flamingo* | 5 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 13 | 11 | 7 |
| Independiente Bonaire* | 5 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 11 | 15 | 6 |
| Vespo | 5 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 6 | 17 | 4 |
| Uruguay | 5 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 7 | 14 | 2 |

*Advance to next round

Kaya 4

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Real Rincon* (C) | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 10 | 5 | 7 |
| Atletiko Flamingo* | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 9 | 4 | 7 |
| Vitesse Bonaire | 3 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 8 | 6 | 3 |
| Independiente Bonaire | 3 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 3 | 15 | 0 |

*Advance to championship final

Final

**Aug 31:** Real Rincon 2-2 Atletiko Flamingo *(Real Rincon win 4-3 on pens)*

# ASIA

## Final Tables 2024-25

### TIMOR-LESTE

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Karketu Dili (C) | 9 | 6 | 2 | 1 | 18 | 2 | 20 |
| Emmanuel | 9 | 4 | 5 | 0 | 13 | 8 | 17 |
| Porto Taibesse | 9 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 9 | 11 | 12 |
| Assalam | 9 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 7 | 12 | 11 |
| DIT | 9 | 1 | 7 | 1 | 12 | 11 | 10 |
| Coracao | 9 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 9 | 10 | 10 |
| Marca | 9 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 6 | 8 | 10 |
| Sport Laulara e Benfica | 9 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 10 | 10 | 9 |
| Academica e Sporting (R) | 9 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 7 | 15 | 9 |
| Ponta Leste (R) | 9 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 7 | 11 | 9 |

# AFRICA

## Final Tables 2024-25

### LIBYA

Regular Season East Group A

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Al Nasr* | 16 | 9 | 5 | 2 | 20 | 9 | 32 |
| Al Akhdar* | 16 | 9 | 4 | 3 | 25 | 11 | 31 |
| Al Tahaddy* | 16 | 6 | 7 | 3 | 20 | 14 | 25 |
| Al Anwar | 16 | 5 | 4 | 7 | 18 | 26 | 19 |
| Al Suqoor | 16 | 5 | 4 | 7 | 16 | 20 | 19 |
| Al Borouq | 16 | 3 | 9 | 4 | 14 | 15 | 18 |
| Khaleej Sirte** | 16 | 4 | 5 | 7 | 15 | 21 | 17 |
| Al Ansar*** | 16 | 5 | 2 | 9 | 17 | 24 | 17 |
| Al Wefaq Ajdabiya**** (R) | 16 | 4 | 4 | 8 | 9 | 14 | 14 |

*Advance to second round
**Enter relegation round
***Deducted 1 point and enter relegation round
****Deducted 2 points

Regular Season East Group B

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Al Hilal Benghazi* | 14 | 11 | 1 | 2 | 30 | 12 | 34 |
| Al Ahly Benghazi* | 14 | 11 | 1 | 2 | 31 | 6 | 34 |
| Al Sadaqa* | 14 | 7 | 3 | 4 | 16 | 13 | 24 |
| Al Ta'awon | 14 | 6 | 4 | 4 | 19 | 14 | 22 |
| Al Andalus | 14 | 5 | 3 | 6 | 17 | 18 | 18 |
| Al Murooj** | 14 | 3 | 3 | 8 | 14 | 25 | 12 |
| Al Branes** | 14 | 2 | 2 | 10 | 11 | 28 | 8 |
| Al Mahdia (R) | 14 | 1 | 3 | 10 | 8 | 30 | 6 |

*Advance to second round
**Enter relegation round

Regular Season West Group C

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Asswehly* | 16 | 12 | 4 | 0 | 36 | 12 | 40 |
| Olympic Azzaweya* | 16 | 11 | 4 | 1 | 28 | 13 | 37 |
| Al Ittihad Tripoli* | 16 | 8 | 4 | 4 | 24 | 10 | 28 |
| Al Majd | 16 | 6 | 3 | 7 | 25 | 29 | 21 |
| Shabab Al Ghar | 16 | 4 | 8 | 4 | 18 | 18 | 20 |
| Abu Salim | 16 | 6 | 2 | 8 | 20 | 24 | 20 |
| Al Bashaer** | 16 | 4 | 5 | 7 | 19 | 21 | 17 |
| Al Tarsana** | 16 | 3 | 6 | 7 | 22 | 22 | 15 |
| Al Nahda Sabha*** (R) | 16 | 0 | 0 | 16 | 5 | 48 | -3 |

*Advance to second round
**Enter relegation round
***Deducted 3 points

Regular Season West Group D

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Al Ahli Tripoli* | 16 | 13 | 3 | 0 | 38 | 4 | 42 |
| Al Madina* | 16 | 10 | 4 | 2 | 27 | 14 | 34 |
| Al Ittihad Misurata* | 16 | 6 | 5 | 5 | 14 | 14 | 23 |
| Al Watan** | 16 | 5 | 5 | 6 | 19 | 22 | 19 |
| Al Malaab | 16 | 3 | 9 | 4 | 13 | 15 | 18 |
| Al Khums | 16 | 5 | 1 | 10 | 11 | 20 | 16 |
| Abi Al Ashar*** | 16 | 3 | 6 | 7 | 10 | 18 | 15 |
| Al Dhahra*** | 16 | 3 | 6 | 7 | 11 | 22 | 15 |
| Asaria (R) | 16 | 3 | 3 | 10 | 13 | 27 | 12 |

*Advance to second round
**Deducted 1 point
***Enter relegation round

• *Bonus points carried over to second round include 3 points for finishing top, 2 points for finishing second and 1 point for finishing third*

Second Round East Group

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Al Ahly Benghazi* | 10 | 6 | 4 | 0 | 23 | 8 | 24 |
| Al Hilal Benghazi* | 10 | 5 | 4 | 1 | 20 | 13 | 22 |
| Al Akhdar* | 10 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 12 | 8 | 19 |
| Al Nasr | 10 | 2 | 5 | 3 | 10 | 13 | 14 |
| Al Sadaqa | 10 | 2 | 3 | 5 | 8 | 15 | 10 |
| Al Tahaddy | 10 | 0 | 1 | 9 | 7 | 23 | 2 |

*Advance to championship round

Second Round West Group

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Al Ahli Tripoli* | 9 | 5 | 4 | 0 | 20 | 8 | 22 |
| Al Asswehly* | 10 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 19 | 11 | 20 |
| Al Ittihad Tripoli* | 9 | 5 | 1 | 3 | 9 | 11 | 17 |
| Al Madina | 10 | 3 | 1 | 6 | 12 | 18 | 12 |
| Al Ittihad Misurata | 10 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 9 | 14 | 11 |
| Olympic Azzaweya | 10 | 1 | 3 | 6 | 10 | 17 | 8 |

*Advance to championship round

Relegation Round East

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Al Murooj | 6 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 9 | 5 | 13 |
| Khaleej Sirte | 6 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 8 | 6 | 11 |
| Al Ansar (R) | 6 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 6 | 6 | 8 |
| Al Branes (R) | 6 | 0 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 9 | 1 |

Relegation Round West

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Abi Al Ashar | 6 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 7 | 4 | 11 |
| Al Tarsana | 6 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 12 | 8 | 11 |
| Al Bashaer (R) | 6 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 9 | 11 | 6 |
| Al Dhahra (R) | 6 | 0 | 3 | 3 | 8 | 13 | 3 |

Championship Round

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Al Ahli Tripoli (C) | 5 | 4 | 1 | 0 | 11 | 1 | 13 |
| Al Hilal Benghazi | 5 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 7 | 7 | 8 |
| Al Akhdar | 5 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
| Al Ittihad Tripoli | 5 | 2 | 0 | 3 | 8 | 9 | 6 |
| Al Ahli Benghazi | 5 | 2 | 0 | 3 | 6 | 7 | 6 |
| Al Asswehly | 5 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 5 | 12 | 1 |

### SIERRA LEONE

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| East End Lions (C) | 34 | 22 | 7 | 5 | 42 | 21 | 73 |
| Bhantal | 34 | 18 | 9 | 7 | 31 | 16 | 63 |
| Bo Rangers | 34 | 16 | 11 | 7 | 43 | 25 | 59 |
| FC Kallon | 34 | 16 | 9 | 9 | 56 | 34 | 57 |
| Bai Bureh Warriors | 34 | 15 | 9 | 10 | 42 | 33 | 54 |
| Old Edwardians | 34 | 12 | 12 | 10 | 33 | 27 | 48 |
| Wilberforce Strikers | 34 | 11 | 14 | 9 | 40 | 37 | 47 |
| Star SA | 34 | 12 | 11 | 11 | 35 | 32 | 47 |
| Ports Authority | 34 | 13 | 4 | 17 | 37 | 40 | 43 |
| Luawa | 34 | 12 | 7 | 15 | 29 | 38 | 43 |
| Wusum Stars | 34 | 11 | 9 | 14 | 31 | 35 | 42 |
| Freetonians SLIFA | 34 | 11 | 9 | 14 | 29 | 36 | 42 |
| Diamond Stars | 34 | 10 | 11 | 13 | 31 | 38 | 41 |
| Abacha City | 34 | 11 | 8 | 15 | 34 | 45 | 41 |
| Mighty Blackpool (R) | 34 | 10 | 10 | 14 | 30 | 42 | 40 |
| Kamboi Eagles (R) | 34 | 6 | 15 | 13 | 29 | 40 | 33 |
| Bullom Stars (R) | 34 | 6 | 12 | 16 | 32 | 45 | 30 |
| Freetown City (R) | 34 | 5 | 11 | 18 | 24 | 44 | 26 |

**October 2025** *Vol. 66 No.2*

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**PICTURES**
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**MANAGING DIRECTOR OF CONSUMER ADVERTISING** Oswin Grady
**OPERATIONS DIRECTOR** Gill Lambert
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**DISTRIBUTION**
Great Britain: Seymour Distribution Ltd
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# Miodrag Belodedici

## Red Star Belgrade v Marseille

1991 European Cup final, Bari, Italy

*How the Romanian defender became the first player to win the European Champions Cup with two different clubs*

Romania star ...Belodedici won 55 caps for his country

"In my football career I had the privilege and luck to play in two European Cup finals, with two different clubs, and win both matches.

The first one was back in 1986 with Steaua Bucharest against Barcelona, when our goalkeeper Helmut Duckadam saved all four penalties in our penalty-shootout victory. No doubt, it was a great success for the club and for me, but I still have mixed feelings when I look back at what happened around that game.

For example, when my team-mates and I went out for a walk near our hotel in Seville, we were, as ever on away trips in Western Europe, accompanied, or rather followed, by two guys from Securitatea, the secret police of the Romanian communist regime. Then, as a reward for winning the European Cup, we were promised that each player would get a car. But at the handover of those vehicles, it turned out that we received in fact freshly painted used cars.

Five years later, I was lucky to be part of a fine Red Star Belgrade team, with great players like Dejan Savicevic, Robert Prosinecki, Darko Pancev, Sinisa Mihajlovic, Vladimir Jugovic and all the others. The triumph in the final against Marseille was the high point of my club career – also because I scored in the penalty shootout.

It is true it wasn't a pretty game and that we mainly defended. But we deservedly reached the final after showing impressive performances and scoring lots of goals against Grasshopper, Rangers, Dynamo Dresden and then Bayern Munich in the semi-final.

As for the 0-0 draw in Bari, from my point of view as a defender, naturally I was pleased that we kept a clean sheet – especially as Marseille had world-class players up front like Jean-Pierre Papin and Chris Waddle.

I have wonderful memories about that game. The amazing celebrations afterwards, both right after the match in our hotel in Bari and upon returning to Belgrade with our fans, were spectacular, unforgettable.

That match was also special for me on a personal level. After the game, I had a brief encounter with my childhood idol Franz Beckenbauer, who was technical director at Marseille. We shook hands and exchanged a few words. I was over the moon to have met him, the best *libero* of all time, for the first time in person. Instantly I remembered an episode when I was a kid in Romania and I wrote a letter to Bayern Munich, asking for a picture and autograph of Beckenbauer. You can imagine my joy when a couple of weeks later I received a parcel from Munich with a signed photo plus a Bayern shirt with Beckenbauer's No.5."

*Interview by Vladimir Novak*

**Red Star Belgrade 0-0 Marseille**
*(AET; Red Star Belgrade win 5-3 on penalties)*

**Coach:** Ljupko Petrovic
Marovic; Savicevic (Stosic 84); Belodedici; Mihajlovic; Binic; Stojanovic; Najdoski; Jugovic; Pancev; Prosinecki; Sabanadzovic

**Coach:** Raymond Goethals
Amoros; Waddle; Boli; Fournier (Vercruysse 75); Papin; Mozer; Olmeta; Germain; Casoni; Pele; Di Meco (Stojkovic 112)

European champions ...Red Star players lift the trophy

> "The triumph in the final against Marseille was the high point of my club career – also because I scored in the penalty shootout"

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